THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

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Cover

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"STOP! STOP!" HE CRIED, RAISING HIS HANDS ALOFT. See page 154.

THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

BY

HERBERT STRANG

FRONTISPIECE IN COLOUR BY CYRUS CUNEO
BLACK-AND-WHITE ILLUSTRATIONS BY RENÉ BULL

LONDON
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CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE NIGHT

"Jolly good curry!" said Bob Jackson, looking up over his spoon. "What do you say, Mac?"

"Ay," responded Alan Mackenzie, in a drawl. He was a man of few words.

"Your Hamid is certainly a treasure of a cook," Jackson went on. "Has he done you yet, Dick?"

"Probably, but I haven't found him out, so it doesn't matter," answered Dick Forrester, the third of the party. "It shows you!"

"What?" asked Mackenzie, who always required statements in full.

"Why, you owl, that it's sometimes better to rely on your instincts than on the advice of kind busybodies. When I came through Calcutta, everybody advised me to wait till I got up country before engaging a man, told me the casuals of the Calcutta hotels were sharks ready to prey on any griffin, and so on. But I came across Hamid, liked the look of him----"

"You've a rummy taste in looks," interposed Jackson, with a laugh. "What with his crooked nose and his one eye, he can't pass for a beauty."

"And that's a fact," said Mackenzie, solemnly.

"Well, anyway, I took him on, and that's three years ago, and I've had no reason to regret it."

"He's a champion cook, at any rate," said Jackson.

"He is that," added Mackenzie, with emphasis.

At this moment the man in question entered with the next course, and further discussion of his qualities was impossible.

The three young fellows were taking their evening meal in a tent pitched near the bank of a stream some twenty miles north of Dibrugarh on the Brahmaputra. They were almost the same age, Mackenzie, the eldest, having recently completed his twenty-first year. Three years before, they had met as strangers on the deck of the liner conveying them to Calcutta, and had struck up one of those shipboard friendships which seldom last. In their case it was otherwise. All three were learning tea-planting in Assam, and, as the "gardens" on which they were severally engaged were many miles apart, their opportunities of foregathering were not very frequent. But they met as often as they could for sport in the form of snipe-shooting, boar-hunting, and other avocations that diversify the monotony of a planter's life, and they had become good comrades, knit one to another closely by the bonds of mutual trust and knowledge.

Three months' leave was now due to each of them. Forrester intended to go home: the others had arranged to make an extended tour in Northern India, and see Delhi, Lahore, and other cities of old renown. But it happened that, a few days before they were to start, they heard that a tiger had been doing mischief in a village some thirty miles from their stations. Fired by the news, they got permission from their managers to make a dash for the scene. Elephants were out of the question. They made the journey on foot, with four coolies to carry the baggage, Forrester's bearer, Hamid Gul--the man whom he had picked up in Calcutta, and who added to his many accomplishments a considerable skill in cooking--and a veteran shikari named Sher Jang, whose services they had often employed in their sporting expeditions. Sher Jang, with the aid of local talent, tracked the animal to its haunt in the jungle; after a few crowded moments it fell to the white men's guns; and its skin, already stripped from the carcase by the

deft shikari, now lay stretched on the sward near the tent.

"Excuse, sahib!" said Hamid Gul, as he passed behind his master's chair after handing round the cutlets. He had been so long accustomed to use English of a sort with globe-trotters that he seldom spoke Hindustani with his master, like the average native servant.

"What is it?" asked Forrester.

The man's reply was to dangle a four-inch centipede before his eyes.

"It had cheek to crawl up honourable back, sahib," he explained.

[image]

The man dangled a four-inch centipede before his eyes. "It had cheek to crawl up honourable back!" he said.

"Kill the beast!" said Forrester.

Hamid dropped the centipede, settled it with his heel, and moved silently out of the tent.

"I can stand mosquitoes, but centipedes make me squirm," said Forrester. "If you know any sound more horrid than the plop of a centipede falling from the roof to the floor, tell me."

"To me the drone of a mosquito is ten times worse," said Jackson. "Apparently they don't like you, but they can never have enough of me, the brutes!"

"Soft and sweet!" murmured Mackenzie.

"What's the tiger-skin worth, Dick?" asked Jackson, ignoring the Scotsman's jibe.

"I don't know; but a goodish sum, probably. A man-eater's skin is usually mangy, but old Sher says that this is in good condition. Look out, Bob!"

Jackson ducked his head, already warned by a booming noise like the hum of an aeroplane engine that a beetle had flown in at the door. They watched the insect whirling about, until it came blindly in contact with the tent pole, and fell to the ground. There it lay on its back, spinning round and round with ever-increasing uproar, until Mackenzie picked it up, and flung it out--into the face of Hamid, approaching with the dessert.

The three men soon finished their meal, and, taking their camp chairs, went out into the open. When they were seated, Hamid came up with a brass salver filled with glowing charcoal, and presented to each a pair of small silver tongs with which to lift a ruddy chip for lighting his pipe. He prided himself on keeping up old customs. Then, with a good-night salaam, he passed into the tent to clear away.

It was a glorious night. The candlelight from the open tent paled in the rays of the moon, soaring aloft in a cloudless sky. A faint breeze stirred the feathery tops of the jungle grass, and ruffled the glassy surface of the rivulet. From the distance came the piercing lugubrious notes of bull frogs; the air sang with the hum of innumerable insects; ever and anon a bat flitted past like a shadow. At one side of the tent, on an upturned tub, sat Sher Jang, the shikari, smoking a long pipe, and gazing solemnly into space. A few yards away the coolies squatted round their camp fire, replete from their unaccustomed meal of tiger's meat, which they had devoured in the joyous belief that it would endue them with a ferocious courage.

The white men puffed away in silence, thinking over the day's sport, dreaming, maybe, of the anticipated delights of the approaching holiday. Hamid noiselessly finished his work, and then crouched with his pipe on a mat by the tent, studiously ignoring Sher Jang, as a cat ignores the dog on the hearthrug.

Thus half an hour passed. Then Mackenzie's cutty dropped from his mouth, and he snored.

"Hullo, Mac, it's time you turned in!" said Forrester, shaking him by the arm.

"Ay," said Mackenzie, sleepily. "Where's my pipe?"

"At your feet."

The Scotsman picked it up, stood erect, yawned, stretched himself, then suddenly dropped his hands to his sides.

"What's yon?" he said.

His companions sprang up. They, too, had heard a rustling in the jungle close at hand--a sound louder than the swish and scrape of the grass in the breeze. Sher Jang came up to them silently, and handed them their rifles. They heard the sound again, and stood in line, peering into the thicket up-stream, their fingers on the triggers.

The rustle ceased.

"Is it a tiger?" Forrester whispered in Hindustani to the shikari.

"No, sahib; tigers make no noise. It may be a bear."

"Or a native?" suggested Jackson.

"No, sahib; *badmashes* might prowl at dawn, but not in the night. I think it is a bear."

The rustle recommenced, and drew nearer and nearer. The white men waited with bated breath, ready to fire the instant the beast showed itself. Hamid had not moved; he was no sportsman, and trusted the sahibs to preserve him from harm. The coolies had run behind the tent.

Moment by moment the sound grew louder. Sher Jang gazed impassively into the jungle; he was too old a hand to show any feeling; but the young planters were tingling with excitement, drew quick breaths, and itched for action. All at

once the long grass parted, and in the flicker of the firelight they saw a form emerge.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Forrester.

They lowered their rifles, and stood for a moment in hesitation. Then all three hastened forward, wondering, alarmed. The form was that of a man, clothed in European style. But he was not walking erect, as men walk. He was creeping slowly, painfully, on all fours. Seeing them advancing towards him, he uttered a faint cry and tried to rise, only to fall forward with a moan. They came to him, and lifted him to his feet.

[image]

As they approached, the man tried to rise, uttered a faint cry, then fell forward with a moan.

"Pull--yourself--together--man!" he murmured, brokenly. "Pull--yourself--together!"

"What is it, sir?" asked Forrester, feeling the man shiver in his sodden clothes.

"Hoots, man!" exclaimed Mackenzie, "get him to the fire. He's fair wandered."

Acting on this practical suggestion, they led the stranger to the fire. The shikari meanwhile remained fixedly on guard, his eyes never quitting the jungle, his ears alert for further sounds.

"A blanket, Hamid!" Forrester shouted.

The man brought a blanket from the tent, and in this they rolled the stranger, setting him as close to the fire as they dared. Mackenzie unscrewed a brandy flask, and poured a little of the liquor between his lips. He gasped and lay quite still, his eyes staring without seeing. Every now and then his body twitched convulsively.

"The fever, sahib," said Hamid.

"A bad attack, too," said Forrester. "Quick! A rubber sheet, a pillow, and my bottle of quinine."

In a few minutes the stranger had been dosed with quinine and made comfortable. As yet he was unable to talk. Enveloped in the blanket, only his face was now visible--the face of a man about thirty-five, refined of feature, with thick brown beard and moustache, matted with damp and dirt. The sun-tanned cheeks were sunken, the eyes within their hollow sockets blazed with the fire of fever. They watched him anxiously, their concern for his pitiable condition mingled with curiosity. How came this man to be wandering alone and unarmed in the jungle?

"Poor body!" muttered Mackenzie. "Did you notice his hands?"

"They shook like a leaf," replied Jackson.

"Ay, but the blood!"

"Was there blood on them?"

"Ay, on the palms."

"Torn by thorns as he crawled along," said Forrester. "He saw the glow of our fire, no doubt, and staggered towards it; you remember he said, 'Pull yourself together!' He has been pulling himself together for days, by the look of him--and it came to crawling at the last! No sign of pursuit, Sher?" he asked, as the shikari came up.

"No, sahib, there is no sound."

"Give him another dose," said Mackenzie.

After the brandy and quinine had been poured between the sick man's lips, his eyes closed and he seemed to sleep.

"We must take turns to watch him during the night," said Forrester, "and get him to my bungalow as quickly as we can to-morrow."

"If he's not away!" said Mackenzie, gloomily. "I'm no liking the looks of him."

"We'll hope for the best. Malcolm has pulled through many bad cases. We'll dose him every hour or so. I'll take first watch; you fellows turn in. I'll call one of you in three hours."

Soon the camp slept; only Forrester remained awake. He sat beside the invalid, bending forward to catch any sign of change upon the fever-flushed countenance. He rose once to replenish the fire, and once to brush away a small beetle that was crawling on the blanket. The eerie wail of a jackal broke in presently upon the lesser sounds of the night; but that was so commonly heard in Assam that Forrester scarcely noticed it.

In an hour he repeated the dose of medicine, and started involuntarily when the sick man, opening his eyes, uttered a name.

"Beresford!"

Feeble as his voice was, there was in it a note of eagerness and relief. For a moment Forrester thought of encouraging the delusion, but it flashed upon him that the man might not have been alone after all. Was his companion lost in the jungle? Leaning forward, he said, quietly:--

"My name is not Beresford, it is Forrester."

At first the man appeared not to have understood, but after a few moments a look of dread gathered in his eyes, and he struggled to get up. Gently pressing him down Forrester said, in slow, clear tones:--

"You are with friends. You came towards our light, you remember. Won't you lie still and collect yourself, and tell me about it? 'Pull yourself together,' you know?"

"Pull yourself together!" the man repeated, like a child.

He lay back and closed his eyes, reopening them presently and turning them upon the fire.

"A light!" he muttered, eagerly. "My last chance! Pull yourself--ah! they've got him!" He shuddered, then with a sudden lapse into partial consciousness, he went on: "There's no time to lose. They've got him! Don't you hear? They've got him! The shutter! I came on for help. One company will do it; but hurry them, for heaven's sake! Take your hand off me, you hound!"

Then followed a bewildering jumble of Hindustani and a language of which Forrester was ignorant. Taking a cup, Forrester hastened to the stream, filled it with water, and, returning, bathed the stranger's burning brow. The raving ceased. After a brief silence the weak voice again spoke coherently, though the speaker, as the words showed, did not realise his position.

"Don't wait for me. In the hills--four days; nights are better; you won't meet men by night. But march day and night; there's no time to lose, I tell you."

"How shall we find the way?" asked Forrester, in the quiet tone he had employed before.

"I'll show you," said the man, eagerly, trying again to rise. "No, I'm dead beat," he added, falling back. "I'll follow you up. I made a jotting; you can't miss them. What are you waiting for?"

"The paper. Where is it?"

The man wriggled within the blanket, and a look of agony distorted his face as he felt his helplessness.

Forrester quickly loosed the wrappings.

"Which pocket?" he asked.

But a stream of incoherent babbling poured from the exhausted man's lips. He lay passive as Forrester felt in his breast pocket and drew forth a small leather case. Opening it, Forrester discovered a folded paper lying loose. He spread it out, and saw what at first seemed to be nothing but a smudge. But when he held the paper nearer to the firelight, he distinguished a design. It was disappointing, puzzling. A pencil line slanted from the left-hand top corner to the middle of the sheet, then branched horizontally to the right. The pencil marks had rubbed and smudged in the man's pocket, but looking at them closely, Forrester made out a few words in addition to the line. At the angle he read "Camel's Hump," at the end

on the right, "Monkey Face." There was nothing more.

CHAPTER II

A COUNCIL OF WAR

Forrester sat musing on what he had learnt from the sick man's broken phrases and the scrap of paper. It was little enough. The stranger's companion, Beresford, had been captured, presumably by natives, at a spot four days' march distant in the hills. His friend had come alone over at least a hundred miles of wild country to seek help. The pencil line traced his course; the names no doubt roughly described conspicuous natural features that would serve as landmarks on his return. But who were the captors? Where was the place of durance? What did he mean by "the shutter"? In what direction lay the point on the route called "Monkey Face"? Without answers to these questions it seemed to Forrester that nothing could be attempted on behalf of the prisoner.

A glance at the invalid showed that he was either asleep or fallen into a stupor. Forrester rose, and paced to and fro, half inclined to wake his friends before the time. The dismal hoot of an owl close at hand, several times repeated, jarred his nerves; by the natives the bird was suspected of possessing the power to scent out those about to die. Though scouting such superstitions, Forrester felt oppressed and uneasy, so that it was with real relief he heard, as he passed the tent, Mackenzie's voice rasp out from the interior:--

"De'il take the fowl!"

"You're awake, Mac?" he said, putting his head in.

"Who could sleep through yon soul-terrifying clamour?"

"Neither soft nor sweet," murmured Jackson. "How is he, Dick?"

"Asleep now, but he's been talking. As you're awake, get up, and I'll tell you."

Throwing rugs about them, they joined him, and all three returned to the fire. Forrester repeated the man's words, and showed them the paper.

"He's not daft, think ye, with his camels and monkeys?" said Mackenzie.

"He was sane enough when he drew this diagram," Forrester replied.

They examined it in turn.

"I say, here's a word you've missed," said Jackson, suddenly. "It's very faint, and badly smudged. I can hardly make it out, but it's 'Falls,' isn't it?"

They scrutinised the paper eagerly in the firelight.

"You're right," said Forrester. "That's his starting-point, by the look of it: some waterfall or other."

The stranger's pocket-book was lying on the ground where Forrester had placed it after removing the paper. Mackenzie picked it up.

"Don't you think we might?" he asked.

"It's the only way," said Jackson. "Find out who he is, and make inquiries about him as soon as we get back."

Mackenzie opened the case. From one of its pockets he drew forth a roll of rouble notes, from another a couple of letters addressed to Captain Redfern at Peshawar, and finally a small note-book.

"There's his name," said Forrester. "The note-book may help us."

He found, however, on opening this, that the leaves contained nothing but jottings of words and phrases in unfamiliar tongues, with their English equivalents. There was no clue to his destination or the object of his journey, no mention of his companion.

"We're not much forarder," said Forrester. "The only thing to do is to get home as quickly as possible to-morrow, and wire through to Sadiya or Calcutta. Somebody will know something about him."

They talked for a few minutes longer; then Forrester and Jackson returned to the tent, leaving Mackenzie to take his spell of watching.

The camp was astir early. While the coolies were packing up, and Hamid was preparing breakfast, Forrester sent Sher Jang to the village half a mile away to enlist carriers for the sick man. In an hour the shikari returned with four lithe, well-developed young Mishmis, whose only clothing was a loin-cloth of bark and strips of bamboo coiled about their arms and legs. The villagers' gratitude for the destruction of the man-eater disposed them to undertake any service for their deliverers, especially when that service was to be rewarded with pay.

After breakfast, a litter was quickly constructed of a blanket and two bamboo stalks cut from the border of the stream. On this they placed Captain Redfern; he was still unconscious, and neither spoke nor stirred; and by eight o'clock the caravan was in movement.

Their way led them through the village. Here they waited to receive the thanks of the head-man, who presented them with a number of fowls in token of his gratitude. A crowd of men gathered around the litter, chattering excitedly in sing-song tones. Sher Jang presently drew Forrester aside.

"They talk of prisoners, sahib," he said in a whisper. "There are two strangers; may one of them be the captain sahib's friend?"

"Ask the head-man," said Forrester, eagerly.

The shikari's question seemed to cause the head-man some embarrassment. At first he denied that there was any truth in his young men's gossip, but on Sher

Jang's insisting, with threats which Forrester would hardly have countenanced, he confessed that two strangers had indeed been brought into the village the night before. A party of the villagers had been away on an excursion some fifteen miles across the Brahmaputra. (He did not disclose the object of the expedition, but the shikari guessed that it was not unconnected with head hunting.) They were marching through the jungle when suddenly they heard a rustle and hid themselves. Two men came in sight, not naked Abors, as they had expected to see, but strangers, clothed. They had captured them without difficulty, for the men bore no weapons and one of them had lost his right arm, and brought them back to the village.

"Where are they?" asked Forrester, when Sher Jang repeated this story to him.

"In the *moshup*," the head-man replied, pointing to a spacious building in the heart of the village. It was built on piles, the walls and the sloping roof made of plantain leaves laid one upon another like the tiles of a European house. There the affairs of the community were discussed by day, and the unmarried men slept at night.

"Let me see them," said Forrester, hoping that by some strange coincidence Captain Redfern's friend, having escaped from captivity, had wandered in much the same direction.

The head-man besought the sahib not to be angry with him. The presence of the strangers was a trouble to him, for he did not know what to do with them. He could not speak their speech, and he was afraid. His young men ought not to have laid hands on men who were clothed. Forrester cut short his apologies, promising that he should suffer no harm; whereupon the head-man sent a messenger to the building aforesaid, to bring forth the prisoners.

The Englishmen awaited their coming with mingled hope and anxiety. By and by two figures emerged from the building.

"Chinamen, by Jinks!" Jackson ejaculated.

Disappointed at the dashing of their hopes, the three were no longer much interested in the Mishmis' prisoners, through whom their journey was being delayed. But they could not help remarking a certain strangeness in the Chinamen's manner of approach. They did not hasten across the open space with the eager gait of men to whom had come sudden deliverance from a terrible fate (for there was not much doubt that the villagers would ultimately have solved their dilemma by adding the Chinamen's heads to their collection). After leaving the *moshup*, and perceiving the unmistakable forms of Englishmen in the distance, the two men halted and appeared to consult together. Then they advanced slowly, one before the other, in the manner of a shepherd driving a solitary sheep.

The first comer was a young man, well grown, but curiously slack in his gait

and bearing. His head hung forward a little; his arms drooped limply at his sides; and in his eyes, as he drew nearer, the Englishmen discerned a languorous and sleepy expression. The second man presented a striking contrast. His age was between fifty and sixty, but he was upright as a dart; and his features, his eyes, his whole mien bespoke energy and determination. The right sleeve of his coat was empty, and lay pinned across his breast.

Escorted by a noisy crowd of the villagers, the Chinamen came up to the Englishmen, and bowed in salutation. Then, before Forrester could utter a word, the younger man began to speak in a breathless, jumpy fashion, strangely unlike the stolidity which is usually associated with the Chinese.

"We ask your assistance, gentlemen," he said in good English; only his reedy tone, the usual difficulty with the letter "r," and a certain formality of phrase proclaimed him a Chinaman. "Being accused of sedition we were on our way from Yunan to Tibet with a small caravan; but a week ago we were pursued by Government troops, and with difficulty escaped, leaving our men and stores behind us."

This was uttered rapidly, as if he were repeating a lesson. At the end of the sentence he glanced timidly at the elder man, who had stood the while gazing unswervingly upon his companion. In his eyes there was a hard, metallic glitter, under which the younger man appeared to droop. Turning again to the Englishmen he went on:--

"Driven from our course by the presence of regular troops near the frontier, we diverged to the south-west towards the borders of Assam. But when we were making our way north-west again towards Tibet, we fell into the hands of these people, and we thank you very much for rescuing us from our terrible plight."

"That's all right," said Forrester, with the Englishman's usual anxiety to avoid any display of feeling. "Does your friend speak English?"

"No," returned the man with a momentary energy. "I myself----"

He broke off suddenly, with a look of apprehension at his companion, who had not spoken, but whose eyes had never left the young man's face. Hurriedly he went on:--

"These people searched us, but did not find the little gold we carry, and the bundle of notes they found have no value for them, though they have not returned them to us. There is plenty of money to pay our way if we are assured of safety, and we ask to be allowed to accompany you until we can resume our journey."

"By all means," said Forrester. "I will get your notes back. I suggest that you make a small present to the head-man, and he will no doubt let you come with us without any bother."

A brief conversation ensued between Forrester and the head-man, through Sher Jang. The notes were surrendered; a few coins were given to the Mishmi;

the Chinamen attached themselves to the Englishmen's party, and the march was resumed.

"He talks fine," said Mackenzie to Forrester, "but there's something fishy about yon Chinkies."

"The elder man has told the other not to give too much away, I think," said Forrester. "But they needn't be afraid of us. Political refugees are safe with Englishmen."

"Man, maybe they're murderers," said Mackenzie.

"You had better look out then," replied Forrester, with a laugh.

"Anyway, there's a hang-dog look about the youngster," said Jackson. "He's like a puppy afraid of a whipping."

More than once during the journey they tried to converse with the young Chinaman, but failed to draw more than a word or two from him. The elder man kept close to his side, and the Englishmen, finding that their well-meant remarks tended only to increase the young man's painful nervousness, gave up the attempt and left the Chinamen to themselves.

It was drawing towards sunset when they reached the plantation on which Forrester was employed. The long march through the hot and humid air had tired them all, and the condition of the sick man had become alarming. With the planter's traditional hospitality, the manager, Mr. Paterson, at once arranged to receive the captain in the bungalow he shared with Forrester, and offered to accommodate the Chinamen for the night in one of his godowns. At the instance of the elder man the younger politely, but with evident reluctance, declined this offer, preferring to push on to Dibrugarh, only a few miles away. The Englishmen did not press them; they were anxious to have as soon as possible the opinion of Dr. Malcolm, the medical officer of the gardens, on the invalid's chances of recovery.

"Eh, man, it's a verra bad case," said the bluff Scots surgeon after making his examination. "Malaria is bad enough, as ye know, but I would not say but this is jungle fever. However, never say die; I'll do what I can."

Early next morning Forrester rode over to Dibrugarh, and telegraphed to a military friend of Mr. Paterson's in Calcutta, asking if anything was known of Captain Redfern. The manager had advised this course in preference to communicating with officials, as likely to avoid red tape and save time. In a few hours the answer came:--

Redfern Captain Bengal Fusiliers on furlough exploring buried cities Chinese Turkestan with Beresford archaeologist.

Forrester was not very strong in geography, but he knew that Chinese Turkestan must be at least a thousand miles from Dibrugarh. What had brought the explorers so far from the scene of their labours? The pressing question, however, was the whereabouts of Beresford. Without loss of time Forrester took the first train for Sadiya, the frontier village where resided the Political Officer whose duty was to keep an eye on the hill tribes.

"Your man is where he had no business to be," said that gentleman when he had heard Forrester's scanty story. "He has been collared, I should think, by the hillmen somewhere south of Tibet--quite beyond my jurisdiction."

"Do you know anything of a waterfall a hundred miles or so north?" asked Forrester.

"There are falls in plenty, no doubt," was the reply; "but the country on the right bank of the Brahmaputra up there is practically unexplored. Part of the course of the Brahmaputra itself is unknown."

"Before he became delirious Redfern talked of sending up a column to rescue his friend."

"My dear fellow, he was talking through his hat. It's entirely out of the question. The Government won't run the risk of provoking a general rising of the hillmen whenever a roving explorer has come to grief in a district where he has no earthly right to be. It would mean one of those little frontier wars that cost no end of money and set the Labour Members barking."

"But surely something ought to be done--can be done for an Englishman," Forrester persisted.

"I'll communicate with headquarters and let you know the result; but I promise you it's no good. The country is a sort of no man's land. Representations at Lhasa and at Pekin would be equally useless; China and Tibet would both wash their hands of the matter. Besides, Government wheels move slowly, the man would be done for before any move could be made; he may be done for already. I'm sorry for him, but he has only himself to blame."

Forrester went away very indignant at what he regarded as official callousness, yet recognising the soundness of the Political Officer's contention. He remembered the Abor expedition, in which a large military force had been engaged for six months in making its way through the jungle to exact retribution for the murder of two Englishmen. Remembering, too, the uncertainty of Beresford's whereabouts, he was forced to admit that the Government might reasonably hesitate to commit themselves to an enterprise of which the end could not be foreseen.

When he returned to the plantation, and told his friends the results of his journey, Jackson, who was excitable and quick-tempered, stamped up and down the room, abusing Governments and Political Officers and mankind generally. Mackenzie, on the other hand, sat placidly smoking his pipe, silent and thoughtful.

In the course of a few minutes, when Jackson had blown off steam, the Scotsman said quietly:--

"Now ye've done blethering, Bob, listen to me. We'll do it ourselves."

"What?"

"Ay!"

"What do you mean, Mac?" asked Forrester.

"I'm telling you. A score or two of the Assam Light Horse----"

"Oh, rats!" cried Jackson, impatiently. "If the Government won't undertake it, d'you suppose they'll let a lot of amateurs go careering about? They'd expect to have to send a Field Force to bring us off. It's absurd."

"Don't blow my head off. I've another proposition. I'm not particular about my leave. Let the three of us see what we can do."

"D'you mean it, Mac?" cried Forrester.

"Ay!"

CHAPTER III

THE REFUGEES

The credit of the arrangements made during the next two days must be divided between Mackenzie and Sher Jang. The former showed a capacity for organisation which his friends had not suspected.

"Just ye listen to me," he said, when they were discussing the proposal he had sprung upon them. "If I tell ye nothing, ye'll no have to tell fibs, d'ye ken? The least wee bit suspicion, and our leave will be stopped. All ye need to know is that before we start for our holiday in earnest we're going on a private hunting expedition, which will be perfectly true. Sher Jang and I between us will make things ready."

"That's the longest speech I've ever heard from your lips, Mac," said Forrester with a laugh.

"Maybe," Mackenzie replied.

He was not the man to let grass grow under his feet. Within an hour Sher Jang set off to interview certain Nagas of his acquaintance--active forest-bred natives who had served from time to time as beaters in hunting expeditions, and were to be depended on for nerve and steadiness. The shikari's mission was to engage half a dozen as carriers for such stores as it would be necessary to take.

They would be armed in case of difficulties with the natives they might encounter on the way, though Mackenzie hoped that no hostility would be aroused by the passage of what was ostensibly a hunting party.

Meanwhile, Mackenzie himself sought out in Dibrugarh a local native contractor, whom he engaged to deliver a carefully calculated quantity of food within two days at a village about twelve miles north of the Brahmaputra. He went about among his acquaintances, trying discreetly to pick up any information they might possess about the country northward; but none of them had travelled more than a score of miles in that direction, so that his cautious inquiries had little result. As Captain Redfern was still in the delirium of fever, it became clear that the leaders of the expedition would have to rely on themselves to discover the place of Beresford's captivity. They anticipated little difficulty in locating the spots Redfern had marked as "Camel's Hump" and "Monkey Face," because in the country through which they were going the mountains rose to a height of many thousands of feet, and eminences so distinctive as to invite special names would no doubt be conspicuous at a very great distance.

On the appointed day the three young fellows set off with Sher Jang and Hamid Gul. Their departure awakened no suspicion, but only a mild envy among those whose holidays were still to come. Arriving at the rendezvous, they found the half-dozen Nagas awaiting them, and the Assamese contractor with the supplies. On entering the village, Jackson turned round with a start.

"What's up, Bob?" Forrester asked, noticing a strange look of bewilderment in his friend's eyes.

"Nothing. I don't know," Jackson replied, slowly. "I had the rummiest feeling--just as if some one were calling me."

Forrester laughed.

"Nerves, old chap," he said.

They went on together, thinking no more of the matter. The Nagas soon shouldered their loads, which consisted of a light camp equipment and a quantity of food. Forrester was about to give the order to start when there came from a hut on the far side of the village the two Chinamen with whom they were already acquainted, followed by two Nagas carrying packages. The men approached in the same order as on the occasion of their first meeting, and the younger man looked more miserable than ever. Coming up to the Englishmen, he addressed them haltingly, in the manner of one performing a distasteful duty against his will.

"I make humble excuses, gentlemen," he said, "but I beg a favour. Learning that you were travelling in this direction, we ask that you will permit us to accompany you and enjoy the benefit of your protection until our ways part."

"I wish to goodness the fellow wouldn't look as if he were going to snivel,"

Jackson whispered to Mackenzie.

"All right; don't apologise," said Forrester. "We're in rather a hurry; I hope we shan't walk you off your legs."

The Chinaman thanked him, and fell back with his one-armed friend, whose eyes had been bent steadily upon his face. Mackenzie went up to the Assamese contractor.

"Ye blethering idiot!" he said. "Didn't I tell you to hold your tongue?"

The Assamese cringed and rubbed his hands together deprecatingly. He explained that the Chinese gentlemen had lodged in his house, and he had only mentioned casually that he was providing stores for a hunting party. It was an honour he much appreciated.

"Eh! Get out!" Mackenzie exclaimed in disgust. "A man that cannot hold his tongue is a very pitiful body. We must get away at once," he added, addressing his friends. "If this wretched creature has been talking, the authorities have maybe got wind of it, and they'll be sending after us."

To avoid the risk of being stopped, they wasted not a minute. The company formed up in marching order and set off. Forrester and Mackenzie led the way with Sher Jang; the Nagas followed: then Hamid Gul and the Chinamen with their retainers, Jackson bringing up the rear. The Nagas, sturdy little fellows about five feet high, brown of skin, with bright eyes tinged with smoke, stepped out cheerfully under their loads. These were carried in conical-shaped baskets slung from their shoulders, and kept in position by a band of plaited cane round the forehead.

The way led through open grass land amid trailing creepers and patches of bog. Insects buzzed around, darting in to sting, and leeches clung to the clothes of the white men and the bare bodies of the natives, and could only be dislodged by the lighted tip of a cigarette. Streams had to be forded, through beds of rushes and bamboo rising to a height of eight or nine feet. The air was hot and moist, and the white men, lightly clad though they were, were soon dripping with perspiration; but they held gamely on until near mid-day, when they took a light meal, resting afterwards for a couple of hours.

During the afternoon, Mackenzie noticed that the Chinamen had pushed forward beyond their allotted position, and, outstripping the Nagas, had closed up within a few yards of the leaders.

"Get back to your place," he said.

The men at once fell back, and for the rest of the day the order was unbroken.

"You spoke rather sharply, Mac," said Forrester.

"Ay. The beggars wanted to hear our talk."

"D'you think so? They carry no loads, and, of course, walk faster than the Nagas."

"That's true, but I don't trust 'em."

"They only want company, I fancy. The poor wretches won't feel safe until they reach Tibet. I've read of Chinese torture, and if they're political refugees they'll be in mortal terror of falling into the hands of their enemies."

"Maybe," Mackenzie replied. "They've a long road to go."

"Look here, you're suspicious," said Forrester. "What's in your mind?"

"Nothing in particular. But I don't like 'em too near."

Towards nightfall they encamped in a fairly open space, and Mackenzie assigned to the Chinamen a position well out of hearing.

On the following day they found marching more difficult. The country rose gradually, presenting many sharp ascents and declivities, jungle alternating with stretches of bare stony ground. As they pursued their toilsome way they realised the stupendous exertions that Captain Redfern must have made in travelling alone, unarmed, and without provisions except such edible plants as he could find in this trackless country. They met no men; Sher Jang turned aside whenever he saw human tracks. But they sighted elephants, wild boars, and other game which appealed to their sporting instincts. They would not delay, however, to try their skill: on the way back, perhaps, when their errand was completed, they might secure trophies of the chase.

Late in the afternoon of the second day they made their camp on a rocky hillside within a few hundred yards of a small mountain stream, which swirled its impetuous way between grassy banks. One of the Nagas descended the slope to fetch water for cooking; the white men, weary with the day's march, were reclining near their tent, smoking in silence.

They were suddenly disturbed by a shout from below, an agonised cry for help. It was followed by a shrill sound which the white men had never heard before, but which caused the shikari to spring to his feet in excitement.

"Elephant, sahib!" he cried.

Almost at the same moment the Naga, his eyes distended with terror, broke out of the long grass at the edge of the stream, and ran up the slope towards the camp. A few yards behind him came a huge elephant, its trunk uplifted, filling the air with its squeals of rage.

The white men seized their guns. But between them and the elephant were the Nagas, who, on the first alarm, rushed helter-skelter towards the tent. It was impossible to fire without hitting them. Heedless of the white men's shouts, they did not turn aside and so allow a clear space for shooting.

"We must cut and run," cried Forrester.

The three turned among the terrified natives, and the whole party scattered in all directions up the hill. The elephant charged on, crashed into the tent and levelled it with the ground, and rushed with infuriated bellowings in pursuit of

the fugitives.

In the haste and excitement of the moment, Forrester had taken no heed of the rest of the party. The appearance of the monstrous beast was so sudden and unexpected, the fury of its thunderous onset so alarming, that dismay and confusion might have been forgiven to the most experienced of hunters. But he became aware that in the dispersion of the party, the young Chinaman, whether by accident or design, was within a few feet of him, making, like himself, for the shelter of a belt of trees a little above them. They entered it almost side by side, and Forrester, gathering his wits, began to dodge in and out among the trees, knowing that the elephant would be at a great disadvantage in following him by reason of its unwieldy bulk.

For a few moments he was too much preoccupied to think of the Chinaman. But the thuds of the great hoofs growing fainter, he stood still and looked to see what had become of the young man. To his horror he saw that the youth had run straight through the copse to a clear rocky space beyond, where the elephant, with a speed which its lumbering frame little promised, was rapidly overtaking him. Divided between alarm for the Chinaman's safety and annoyance at his stupidity, Forrester sprinted through the copse, hoping at least to divert the beast and give the fugitive a chance.

The Chinaman's luck was against him. Ignorant of the fact that elephants have difficulty in running obliquely up a slope, he was racing straight up hill, the animal, screaming shrilly, only a dozen yards behind. Forrester perceived that in a very few moments the hapless youth must inevitably be run down and trampled to death unless the elephant were checked at once. He stopped short, threw up his rifle and fired. The bullet had as little effect on the tough hide as a pea might have had. Neither the report nor the impact caused the elephant to swerve.

[image]

The terrified Chinaman raced up the hill, the elephant, screaming shrilly, close behind him. Forrester threw up his rifle and fired, but on that tough hide the bullet had no effect.

"Behind the ear!" Forrester said to himself, as he lifted the rifle for a second shot, and steadied himself to take a careful aim. He fired, and could scarcely believe his eyes when the huge creature stumbled forward, recovered itself, then rolled over sideways and lay stretched upon the ground.

Breathless, quivering from his exertions, Forrester stood gazing upon the inert lump. He was barely conscious of the shouts of his party beyond the copse

and higher up the hill. But in a moment he was roused from his brief abstraction. The young Chinaman, seeing that there was nothing more to fear, had hastened back. He came eagerly up to his rescuer, and began to speak in a low, agitated voice.

"Sir--sir," he gulped, trying to regain his breath; and Forrester was amazed at the change that had come over him. Gone was the languid droop, the timid mien, the furtive cringing expression of the eye. The lad stood erect; his eyes shone; words flowed from his lips, not in the sing-song of one repeating a lesson, but with the modulations of spontaneous energy and a full heart.

"Sir, sir," he said, "twice you have saved my life. Will you not help me again? Save me from I know not what. I am not what I seem, the servant of that horrible man. We are not refugees. My father is a mandarin, the governor of Szechuan; I am his eldest son. Six months ago that man, Wen Shih, entered my father's service; he was a diligent servant, and was trusted by all. He gained my confidence; we were much together. One day he bade me come with him a journey, and I came, and I cannot get away. Where we go I know not, but I fear, I fear! He holds me, he commands me, he--he is calling me!"

At these last words his tone fell to a murmur, his jaw dropped, and a look of terror came into his eyes.

"Go on; tell me more," said Forrester, taking the Chinaman by the arm.

"He is calling me," the youth murmured again, though his elder companion was not within sight, nor could his voice be heard. He turned slowly about, and with head hung forward and arms outstretched before him, in the attitude of a man groping in the dark, he staggered rather than walked back towards the camp.

CHAPTER IV

MORE MYSTERY

Forrester's attention was diverted from the Chinaman by the appearance of his friends, whom the sound of his lucky shot had drawn through the copse.

"By Jinks!" Jackson cried as they came up, "you killed him!"

"I never made such a fluke in my life," Forrester replied. "Come and have a look at him."

They found that the bullet, entering behind the ear, had passed clean through the animal's brain.

"You *must* take his tusks," Jackson went on. "It would be simply idiotic not to carry home the trophies of your first elephant. That's a job for Sher Jang."

"Where is he?" Forrester asked.

"Ay, where?" Mackenzie echoed. "He's a queer sort of shikari to run from an elephant."

"We can't fling a stone at him over that," Forrester remarked, with a laugh. "Let's get back to camp, and send him up. I dare say the men would relish elephant meat for supper."

As they turned towards the camp, the Chinaman's strange words recurred to Forrester's mind.

"I say, you fellows, there *is* something mighty queer about those Chinamen," he said. "The youngster was running with me, and after I had shot the elephant he began to tell me things--not in what Bob calls his snivelling style; he seemed a new man altogether. He said they're not political refugees at all."

"Eh! I thought as much," Mackenzie put in. "They're criminals."

"I don't know. He said the elder man was a servant in his father's house, and his father is a mandarin, governor of some place or other. The servant has some sort of a hold over the fellow. But just as he was getting to the most interesting part of his story, he suddenly broke off, whispered that the man was calling him, and looked as terrified as if he'd seen a ghost. I asked him to go on, but he turned away, stretched out his hands like that," he illustrated the gesture, "and began to stumble back like a blind man. Didn't you see him as you came through the copse?"

"I caught sight of him, but didn't notice him particularly," said Jackson. "What do you make of it? Is he cracked?"

"Upon my word I should have thought so, only he spoke sensibly enough. I'll see if I can get more out of him presently. The other man doesn't know English, so the young one can tell us anything he likes without his being any the wiser."

On emerging from the copse they saw that the Nagas had collected in a group up the hill, evidently awaiting assurance that all danger was past. Hamid Gul was helping Sher Jang to re-erect the flattened tent. Near by, the elder Chinaman sat cross-legged on a rock, and the younger stood before him in the attitude of a suppliant.

As the three men approached the tent, Sher Jang came to them.

"I have shot the elephant," Forrester said to him. "Go up presently and cut him up. We'll keep the tusks. Why didn't you come with me?"

"I watched, sahib," the man replied.

"But watching is not work for a shikari."

"Sometimes it is, sahib. Why did not the stranger yonder run with the rest?"

"What do you mean?"

"He sat on the rock where he sits now, sahib. The elephant passed within a few feet of him, but he did not move. He sat there, and his eyes were fixed like glass. I thought: why is he so still, like a Buddha in stone? And I stayed to watch him; it seemed good to me, sahib."

"And what did you see?"

"No more than I have said, sahib, except that presently the young stranger came back like a blind beggar feeling his way through the bazar. Then the elder man smiled, and his smile was like the grin of a tiger. That is all, sahib."

"Well, get the tent up. Is the pole broken?"

"We have spliced it with rope, sahib. That simpleton," indicating Hamid, "wrung his hands and declared the pole useless, but I showed him the way."

The three men went on towards the Chinamen. At their approach the elder man rapped out a few words in a stern and peremptory tone to his companion, then rose to his feet with a respectful salutation to the white men. Forrester acknowledged it, and, turning at once to the younger man, asked him to continue the story he had so abruptly broken off. A pitiful look of distress came into the lad's eyes; his lips moved, but not a sound issued from them.

"Come, there's nothing to be afraid of," Forrester urged. "You may speak quite freely."

"Forget what I said, sir," the lad muttered. "It was false. I beg you think no evil of my kind friend."

His voice hardly rose above a whisper; every word seemed to be wrung from him.

"But surely there is something in it," Forrester persisted. "Was your friend a servant in your father's house? You did not invent that?"

The lad cast a look at his companion that might have been interpreted as terror or anxiety. The elder man did not return the glance, but stood beside him with a mien suggesting patient forbearance or even absence of mind.

"I do not know what I said," the young man replied slowly, like one talking in his sleep. "I was excited after the great peril I had escaped, my mind was troubled, and my tongue spoke foolishness. Pardon me, I pray you."

Seeing that nothing more was to be got out of the lad, Forrester turned away with his companions.

"There's some mystery here," he said, when they were out of earshot. "What's the matter, Bob?" he asked, noticing a strange look in Jackson's face.

"I don't know: I feel as if this were all a dream--a queer sort of fuzzy feeling in my head."

"I feel puzzled enough," said Forrester. "Why should the fellow make out that he was telling lies? It looks as if he's mortally afraid of the other man, but I can't make it out, for the chap doesn't know English, and wouldn't understand,

whatever was said. What do you say, Mac?"

"There's no call to say anything," Mackenzie replied.

"There's the canny Scot," Forrester said with a laugh. "You'll think all the more, I suppose."

"I'm thinking they're worth watching," was Mackenzie's answer.

Next morning a slight change was made in the order of the march. Mackenzie asked Jackson to go ahead with Forrester, while he brought up the rear.

"I don't mind, but what's your reason?" Jackson asked.

"I just wish to contemplate the Chinkies from the rear," was the reply.

Whatever the result of his examination was, Mackenzie said nothing about it.

Towards mid-day the snow-clad peaks of a mountain range opened up ahead of the party; although in the clear atmosphere they seemed to be only a few miles distant, the nearest was probably fifty miles away. The intervening country was a series of undulations, bare stretches of rock, here and there deeply fissured, alternating with thickly wooded valleys and dense jungle. Ever since they left Dibrugarh the party had been steadily climbing, and the higher they rose, the less their progress was impeded by undergrowth; and the lower temperature made their exertions less fatiguing. But the white men were more and more impressed with the courage and endurance which Captain Redfern had shown in traversing this wild region.

They kept a keen look-out for hills answering to the names he had given them, for they had no other landmarks by which to direct their course. It was impossible to believe that they were peaks of the snowy range so far ahead: four days would not have sufficed for the covering of so immense a distance. Forrester was already feeling very doubtful of the possibility of distinguishing the hills, when Sher Jang suddenly pointed to the eastern end of a smaller range that crossed the prospect perhaps twenty miles away. It was a precipice falling away abruptly to the general level from a height of two or three thousand feet, and the contours of the scarp bore a strong resemblance to a monkey's face. Forrester swept his eyes along the range from east to west, and gave a cry of delight when he distinguished at the western end a rounded eminence shaped like the hump of a camel.

"We're on the right track," he said. "We shall have to round that range, then cut away northward to find the falls. Probably they won't be so easy to discover."

"It will be to-morrow night before we reach the Camel's Hump," said Jackson. "The falls can't be more than a day's march farther, or Redfern couldn't possibly have done it in four days."

"We go slower than he did, owing to our baggage. If we only came across some natives we might ask them the way, but the whole country seems to be uninhabited."

When they halted to form camp, Mackenzie said:--

"Just now I caught the young Chinky talking to Hamid Gul, and I stopped it. Hamid told me the fellow asked where we were going, and why we didn't look for game. I got up to them in time to prevent the answer."

"They were very natural questions," said Forrester. "We are supposed to be a hunting party."

"Ay, and the Chinkies are supposed to be political refugees, but I have my doubts. I would like well to see the back of them. Have you had any return of that fuzzy feeling, Bob?"

"No. You haven't had it?"

"Not I. What about you, Dick?"

"D'you think it's catching?" Forrester asked with a laugh. "My head's perfectly clear, thanks."

But a couple of hours later, when all three were sitting smoking at the door of the tent, Forrester suddenly stood up, looked round him with an air of perplexity, then took a step in the direction of the spot where the Chinamen were reclining. Mackenzie grasped his coat, and pulled him back into his seat.

"What are ye about, man?" he asked.

For a moment Forrester was silent, then he said:--

"It's very queer. I felt as if I must walk over there, goodness knows what for. The feeling has gone now. What's wrong with me?"

"Malaria, as like as not," said Mackenzie. "Here, take a stiff dose of quinine. We don't want an invalid on our hands."

Forrester had no return of his strange vertigo, if such it were, and after supper he laughed at himself for his momentary weakness.

By the afternoon of the next day they had worked round the Camel's Hump, and, turning northwards, saw stretched out before them a tract of dense scrub, beyond which in the far distance towered the peaks of the snowy range. They decided to continue their march until sunset, hoping that somewhere amid the scrub a suitable camping place would offer itself. So difficult was the passage now, that the party became more split up than had hitherto been the case; but there was no danger of anyone straying, since the order had been given that those behind should not turn aside from the tracks of those who had preceded them.

In course of time Sher Jang reached a fairly open space, and a halt was called. The Nagas straggled in, Hamid Gul followed them and Mackenzie appeared last of all. For a few moments his companions were too much occupied to notice a diminution of their party, but presently Forrester, after a look around, cried:--

"Where are the Chinkies, Mac?"

"Aren't they here?" Mackenzie asked in return.

"You ought to know--you were contemplating their backs," Jackson re-

marked.

There was no sign of them. Forrester called up their Naga carriers, and Sher Jang questioned them. The men could give no information. Once or twice they had lost sight of the Chinamen as the scrub hid them from view. They had thought nothing of that.

The three white men looked at each other.

CHAPTER V

THE EYE

Forrester was the first to break the silence.

"They've gone a little out of the way," he suggested. "By the time we've got the tent up, they'll be here."

But minutes passed, and the men did not appear.

"We had better go and look for them," said Jackson.

"It's a good riddance," Mackenzie replied.

"But we can't leave them in the lurch," said Forrester. "They've absolutely no defence against wild beasts. Come along! We three will go with Sher Jang back into the scrub and beat it. We mustn't lose touch with each other. Every man give a coo-ee every few seconds."

The suggestion was carried out. The four men scattered, and worked back through the scrub until daylight was almost gone. No trace of the Chinamen could be discovered. Forrester called to his companions to join him.

"It's my belief they've done a bolt," he said. "They couldn't possibly have missed the track. But where can they have gone? Tibet is still very far off, and they run no end of risks going through the country unarmed."

"D'you think they've got friends in this neighbourhood?" Jackson asked.

"Eh, what use is it talking?" Mackenzie replied. "They're gone, and for my part I don't wish to see them again."

"All the same, it's queer their going away suddenly without their carriers, and not saying a word," Forrester remarked. "They were polite enough in asking to be allowed to join us."

"Ay, there's something mysterious about them; we must be on our guard," said Mackenzie. "It's not very likely they're in league with the natives of these parts, but you never can tell."

"I'd give something to learn the history of that one-armed fellow," said Jackson, reflectively.

Next day, on emerging from the tract of scrub, the party found themselves on a bare rocky ridge below which stretched a broad and densely wooded valley. On the farther side the ground rose steeply to the foot-hills of the snowy range. The hollows were clothed with vegetation, which formed dark green patches amid bare brown spaces of rock.

"Which way are we to go now?" Forrester said, as they halted on the ridge to survey the country.

"Camel's Hump and Monkey Face are clean out of sight," said Jackson, after a glance behind. "All we can do is to make straight for the north. The falls must be part of a river, and when we get a bit higher we may see it winding through the country. If it's of any size, we must work up its course until we find the falls."

"Ay, there's nothing else for it," said Mackenzie. "I'm beginning to think we've tackled a tough job."

"I've thought that for some time," said Forrester. "However, we'll go through with it. The first thing now is to cross this valley. Lead the way, Sher Jang."

To descend the precipitous slope through entangling undergrowth that reminded them of bramble bushes in England was a long and arduous undertaking. The surface of the ground was so irregular that they dared not take a step without first probing the bushes for a foothold. Every few yards there was the risk of a sprained ankle or a broken neck. It was mid-day before they reached the bottom, and then the ascent on the farther side was even more toilsome, though less dangerous.

As the day drew on, the air became sultry and oppressive, portending a storm, and the party pushed on as rapidly as possible in order to fix their camp before the rain began. Late in the afternoon, Sher Jang suddenly halted in a clump of woodland, and pointed to some tree-stumps on which there were clear marks of axes.

"There are men hereabout, sahib," he said to Forrester.

"Thank goodness!" Mackenzie ejaculated. "Now, perhaps, we will find someone who'll tell us the road."

"Keep a look-out, though," said Jackson. "We don't want to tumble into a hornets' nest."

They advanced cautiously, noting as they proceeded more stumps, and at one spot a pile of newly felled logs. The trees grew thickly, and to a considerable height, so that they marched in a dim twilight. Presently, almost without warning, they came to a wide open space, on the far side of which a number of small, dark-skinned, half-naked people were gathered about cooking-pots. Behind them, a line of grass huts stood at the fringe of the woodland. Forrester called a halt at

the edge of the clearing, intending to discover from his Naga carriers whether they could identify the people. But some slight sound must have been heard by the natives, for they suddenly sprang up; the women and children rushed into the huts, and the men seized their long bows and arrows, and stood facing the quarter from which they had heard the alarming sound.

Trusting in the appearance of a white man to allay their fears, Forrester stepped forward out of the gloom of the forest. His action had an effect exactly the contrary of what he intended. At the first sight of him the little men uttered a wild howl, and fled among the trees, followed by the women and children, who streamed out of their huts with screams of fright.

"They take you for a bogey-man, Dick," said Jackson. "Evidently they have never seen a white man before."

"What shall we do?" Forrester asked of Sher Jang.

The shikari suggested that the Nagas might be able to communicate with the natives, and reassure them. Accordingly the head carrier, dropping his burden, stepped forth into the clearing, and shouted "He-hoh! He-huh!" in a tone that might have been heard half a mile away. Some time elapsed before his shouts had any result; then a few of the men came slinking back, dodging from tree to tree with the utmost wariness.

The Naga spread his arms to show that he carried no weapon; then squatted in the middle of the clearing and began to talk in a musical sing-song, every now and then waving his hand in the direction of his employers. What he said they did not know, nor did Sher Jang, though he could speak to him in his own tongue; but it was clear that he had managed to make himself understood by the villagers, for these came dropping back by twos and threes, until apparently the whole population was once more assembled.

Forrester sent the Naga to them with a number of slight gifts, and through him asked to be allowed to camp in the clearing for the night. After some discussion among themselves, this permission was granted, provided the strangers would remain on the opposite side. Some of them plucked up courage to cross the clearing and watch the erection of the tent, and the other movements of the white men; and, finding that they were not molested, they squatted in a ring on the ground, following every operation with a lively curiosity that found expression in monosyllabic cries and clicking noises in-their throats.

When the white men had eaten their supper, they decided to profit by the friendliness of these peaceable villagers. To hold a palaver would be a difficult matter, since Sher Jang had to interpret Forrester to the Naga, and the Naga to translate to the village head-man. But the opportunity of gaining some clue to their destination was too good to be neglected. It was a strange scene in that forest glade, illuminated by the camp fires on opposite sides. The three white

men sat in front of the tent, their followers ranging themselves on the wings. A few yards in front of them the chief men of the village crouched in a half circle. Behind stood the rest of the community, young and old, gazing wide-eyed over the heads of the men. Everybody, white and brown, old and young, men and women, smoked a pipe. Sher Jang and the Naga stood between the white men and the villagers, the former imperturbable as ever, the latter assuming a comical air of importance, and turning now and again to his friends for admiration. The conversation took the form of question and answer.

"Do they know of a waterfall hereabouts?" Forrester asked.

"Yes," was the reply. "There is a little fall close at hand; but it is nothing to the fall yonder in the mountains, where the river pours from the clouds into the depths of the earth."

"Have they ever been there?"

"No, but they have seen it afar off."

"Do they know whether men live in its neighbourhood?"

At this question the little man hesitated, and spoke a few words to his companions. Then he admitted that there were men living near the waterfall.

"Why haven't they ever been there, then?" asked Forrester.

"They have never dared."

"Are the men enemies of theirs?"

This question again was not answered as promptly as the others. The reply came at last that the men were not exactly enemies, but there was the Eye.

"What does he mean? What is the Eye?" Forrester asked.

"What is the Eye?"

The Naga repeated the question. The villager hesitated. At this moment there was a slight rumble of thunder in the distance, and the man started backward, spreading his arms. A second and a louder rumble followed, and then a lightning flash. The man and his companions bent forward, till their heads touched the ground, covering their eyes with their hands. In tones of awe a few words fell from their lips.

"What do they say?" Forrester asked.

"That is the Eye, sahib," Sher Jang replied, after questioning the Naga.

Then the thunder pealed directly overhead, clap succeeding clap, and sheets of lightning moment by moment threw a blinding glare over the clearing.

The women fled screaming into their huts, the men cowered on the ground, and showed signs of abject terror, uttering piteous cries which the white men, though they did not understand the words, recognised as appeals for mercy. The little spokesman addressed a word or two to the Naga interpreter, then rushed back across the clearing with his friends. All disappeared into their dwellings.

"What did he say?" Forrester asked.

"'He speaks! He speaks!'"

"They take the thunder to be the voice of an angry god," Jackson suggested.

"Maybe," said Mackenzie, "but our Nagas aren't afraid, and they are akin to these people."

"It's because they have had dealings with white men, perhaps," said Forrester. "It's only the untutored savage who is likely to cherish such a superstition. Anyhow, it's clear that we shan't get anything more out of them to-night. We had better try again in the morning."

The tempest heralded by the thunder and lightning soon broke over the camp. Rain fell in floods, quenching the fires in a few seconds, and turning the hollow centre of the glade into a lake. The travellers, accustomed to the torrential rains of north-eastern India, had brought oil-skins and rubber sheeting; but even these did not avail to protect them thoroughly from the terrific downpour. Their native followers sought a partial shelter in the forest, where they remained until the violence of the storm abated. The Englishmen spent an uncomfortable night on the sodden ground, and dosed themselves with quinine to ward off the malarial fever that so often ensues on exposure to the damp in tropical climes.

The morning broke fair and sunny, and a fierce cold wind blew down from the mountains. With the change of weather the villagers had regained their courage, and crowded about the travellers with the same curiosity as they had shown the evening before. Some of the men fraternised with the Naga carriers, exchanging food with them, and talking freely.

"I daresay we shall be able to persuade them to guide us to the fall," Forrester remarked, watching them as he sat at breakfast with his friends.

"But the man said they had never dared to go there, because of the Eye, whatever that is," said Jackson.

"Well, they will at least put us in the right direction," said Forrester. "If they bring us within sight of it, that will be enough."

"What are they saying to our Nagas?" said Mackenzie. "Look at them!"

The faces of the carriers wore an expression of uneasiness, and they glanced at their employers with the sidelong stealth of men conscious of a fault.

"You had better ask about guiding us at once," said Jackson.

Forrester sent Sher Jang for the spokesman of the previous evening and the Naga who had interpreted. A bargain was soon struck. In return for a few trifling articles of the camp equipage, the villager agreed to guide the party in the direction of the waterfall. Part of the payment was handed over at once, and the customary preparations for marching were made. But, when Forrester gave the order to shoulder loads, to his astonishment the Nagas made no movement. They stood back with an air of sullen obstinacy, muttering under their breath.

"What does this mean?" Forrester asked Sher Jang.

"They say they will go no farther, sahib," the shikari replied.

"Nonsense! What's the matter with them?"

"They engaged for the job," Mackenzie added. "Tell them they'll lose their pay if they back out."

But the Nagas treated with equal indifference all that was said to them. When Sher Jang threatened them with the loss of their pay, one of them blurted out that they would carry the baggage back for nothing, rather than go farther northward.

"But why is it?" Forrester cried in exasperation. "What has upset them? What are they scared of?"

"They say the Eye, sahib," Sher Jang replied, after he had questioned the men.

"The Eye again!"

"That is what they were colloguing about just now, no doubt," said Mackenzie.

"Tell them it's all a pack of nonsense, Sher Jang," said Forrester. "There is no eye that can do them any harm, and our guns will protect them."

The Nagas' response to this was to shout to the villagers who stood looking on. Two of these ran across the clearing, and entered one of the huts.

"They say you shall see, sahib," Sher Jang explained.

"It is some ridiculous superstition, I suppose," said Forrester. "We shall have to squash it somehow, or we are dished."

In a few moments the villagers emerged from the hut, leading an old man whose long hair and beard betokened the neglect of all tendance. His right arm was missing, and his eyes had the dull, pathetic, wistful look of the half-witted. His guides brought him up to within a few yards of the white men, and the Nagas pointed to him with wild excitement, continually exclaiming:--

"The Eye! The Eye!"

[image]

As the old man was led forward, the Nagas pointed to him with wild excitement, continually exclaiming, "The Eye! The Eye!"

Forrester asked Sher Jang to get from the people an explanation of the connection of this old man with the Nagas' refusal to march. The story, as told by the villager through the Naga head-man, was that the one-armed greybeard had been a brave warrior in his youth, and was one of a war party who, many years before, had ventured beyond the great waterfall. Of them all, only he had returned, without his right arm. When his people asked him what had happened to his

companions, and how he had lost his arm, his only answer was "The Eye!" Ever since, his mind had been a blank. He could tell them nothing, had no recollection of what had happened; and the people had kept him with them, showing him the veneration which simple races often pay to the half-witted.

The white men were mystified. The story seemed incredible, yet there was the man in proof of it.

"None of the people have ever been beyond the fall since?" asked Forrester.

"None of us," was the reply, "but we have seen men go sometimes, and we have never known them to return. Yes: there was one who returned. He was fair of skin like these lords, and wore clothes like them. There were two who went, but only one returned. Some of our people saw him hasting by the lake near the fall, and the little men were running after him, but he escaped them, and went into the forest."

"Who are the little men?" Forrester asked.

"They are men like monkeys," replied the man, holding his hand about four feet from the ground to indicate their height. "They are the men who take the wood from us."

On further questioning, the men explained that the country beyond the falls was destitute of large trees, and the little men paid the villagers for timber cut in the forest. This timber was conveyed to a certain spot some distance short of the waterfall, and removed thence by the little men to their home in the mountains, which the villagers had never beheld.

"How long ago was the white man seen?" Forrester asked.

The man held up his hands with fingers outspread.

"Redfern, to a certainty!" Jackson exclaimed. "We must go on, and get to the bottom of this mystery. It's horrible to think of what may possibly happen to Beresford."

"Ay, there's something uncanny beyond," Mackenzie said, thoughtfully.

"Whatever they mean by the Eye, it is clear that something gruesome goes on among the little men," said Forrester. "There's nothing for it but to forge ahead, and tackle them if there's the ghost of a chance for us. What do you say? Are you game to stick to it, even if we can't persuade the Nagas to come?"

"Ay, I'm for going on," said Mackenzie.

"I too," said Jackson. "We can but try, and I don't suppose the little men,

whoever they are, have rifles. Let us start at once."

CHAPTER VI

THE IRON SHUTTER

"You come with us, Sher Jang?" asked Forrester.

"Sahib, I am your servant," the man replied, simply.

"And you, Hamid?"

The cook pulled nervously at his beard, turned up the whites of his eyes, shot a savage glance at the shikari, then said in a voice which all his resolution could not prevent from trembling:--

"Sir, I step out like a man. One volunteer is worth tons of pressed beef."

"Which means that without these idiotic carriers we shall have to travel light," said Forrester. "Just put up enough food for two days; we'll carry it somehow among us. We must leave the tent with the Nagas. They had better remain here until we return."

"Can't we take more grub?" Jackson asked.

"If we don't do it in two days we shan't do it at all, so it's useless overloading ourselves. We risk losing the tent, of course, but that can't be helped."

Their preparations were quickly made, and they set off while the morning was still young. Hamid Gul carried his cooking utensils, plates, knives and forks, and other articles; Sher Jang shouldered some blankets, in which he had wrapped a quantity of ammunition, and the three white men divided the food among them. Each of the party had his rifle slung behind his back.

Their guides, a dozen of the villagers, harnessed themselves to tree trunks, which they dragged through the wood and down the rocky slope beyond. It had been arranged before they started that the white men should follow at some little distance, so that the natives, in case of need, might repudiate knowledge of them, and escape all responsibility for bringing the strangers to the neighbourhood of the falls.

At the foot of the slope they came to a rivulet. Without the Naga head-man Sher Jang could not hold any oral communication with the villagers; but they managed to convey to him the information that the smaller falls of which they had spoken were a little way down-stream; the larger falls lay a much greater distance in the other direction. Some minutes were occupied in forming the balks

of timber into a raft. When this was done half the party of natives swam to the farther bank, carrying ropes attached to the raft, and then the two sections hauled their wares against the sluggish current, tramping along towpaths which must have been trodden by several generations of their forebears.

The view ahead was shut out by the trees that grew almost to the edge of the winding stream; but it was not long before the white men, walking about half a mile behind their guides, were aware of a dull rumble that grew louder moment by moment as they proceeded.

"That's the fall!" cried Jackson. "We can't be far away."

"A pretty big one, by the sound of it," Forrester remarked. "Small falls make a sort of crash--this is more of a roar. Perhaps we shall find a second Niagara."

"I'm fair flummoxed!" said Mackenzie, inconsequently.

"What about?"

"About yon Eye. You see, these folks were terrified by the storm: 'He speaks,' they said. Well, that was the thunder. By what the philosophers call parity of reasoning, the Eye is lightning. Well, lightning can take off a man's arm, and strike him daft or dead; but what about the little men up yonder? Are they scunnered at the Eye, too? What has the Eye to do with Beresford?"

"Trust a Scot to ask questions!" said Jackson. "But you won't reason it out, Mac; you'll just have to wait, like an Englishman."

"Och, man! I want facts. Give me facts, and I'll draw my own conclusions."

"Well, this row is a fact, and a stunning one," said Forrester. "It's time we caught sight of the fall that's making such an uproar."

But they marched on for a couple of hours without seeing any sight of a waterfall, or even any quickening of the current. The noise had gradually increased to a stupendous din, and thoughts of their ultimate errand were overborne by excitement as they looked eagerly ahead for the mass of falling water. At last the belt of forest land came to an abrupt end, and they gazed forth over a wide rocky plain, in the midst of which was an immense lake that appeared to be considerably below the level of the surrounding country. From it ran the stream whose course they were following, and a larger stream far to the right.

Beyond the plain rose the mountains, towering up peak behind peak to the summits of the snowy range in the remote distance. The three men halted involuntarily, struck both by the majesty of the scene and by the deafening roar which almost drowned their voices.

"Man, it's grand!" Mackenzie shouted.

"But where is it?" Forrester bawled in his ear.

They looked all around, but saw nothing to account for the thunderous noise. The sky was overcast, and a layer of mist obscured the lower foothills, though the heights beyond heaved their grey masses in clear undulations miles

above. As they stood, a sunbeam stole through the clouds, and a rainbow flung its gay arch across the plain directly ahead of them.

"There's rain over there," said Jackson, at the top of his voice.

"Only mist!" Forrester cried in reply.

For a few moments they gazed mutely upon a sight that never loses its interest and wonder. Then Mackenzie smote his thigh, and cried like one in ecstasy:--

"Man--it's the Fall!"

The mist was rolling away as the sun gathered strength, yet the rainbow did not fade, but shone more brightly than ever over a space of perhaps one-eighth of a mile. And then the onlookers saw that what had hitherto seemed to them a part of the bank of mist was in reality a gigantic torrent of water, mingled with spray thrown up hundreds of feet from the unseen bottom. They watched it in silent awe. The villagers had described it as falling from the clouds into the depths of the earth. Their words appeared to be literally true. An eighth of a mile in width, the torrent poured over the edge of a tableland--a single huge step in the ascent to the plateaux of Tibet. Mist still hung above it, the enormous screen of spray concealed its lower part, and at the distance they still were from it the spectators could only just distinguish the movement of the mighty volume of water.

It had been arranged with their guides that they should remain on the spot where they first caught sight of the fall until the men had delivered their timber and returned. The delay gave them an opportunity of taking a meal. As they ate they amused themselves by guessing at the height of the fall. Forrester suggested that it was as high as St. Paul's; Jackson thought this estimate too low; and Mackenzie astonished the others by declaring that he wouldna wonder but it was fully as high as Ben Lomond.

It was three hours before the natives returned, and the white men, setting forth impatiently at length to skirt the lake and reach the foot of the hills on the western side of the fall, found to their amazement that they had nearly two miles to go before they came level with it. Then they were struck dumb by the full magnificence of the scene. The spray itself, rising like steam from a gigantic cauldron, attained to the height of St. Paul's. The two Englishmen were prepared to admit that the top of the fall was even higher than the summit of Ben-Lomond; but Mackenzie's calculating eye gauged more nearly to the truth.

"I would say it's two thousand feet, or a wee bit more," he said, and his friends laughed at the incongruous use of the word "wee" in such a connection.

They found that the scarp over which the torrent poured extended for miles on each side. It appeared to be almost perpendicular, though away to the left it became more broken. On the right, except for one or two steep and rugged spurs, it was one continuous wall of rock.

The path they had followed round the western shore of the lake brought

them to a small wooden bridge spanning an inflowing stream. It somewhat resembled the bridge delineated in the well-known willow pattern. To this the raft of timber was moored. Evidently it was part of the plan for maintaining the secrecy of the hill community that purchasers and vendors should come into contact as seldom as possible; or perhaps the woodcutters' own fear of the Eye kept them from approaching nearer to the dwelling of the "little men." No doubt the timber would presently be fetched, and drawn along the stream into the lake, and thence to its destination.

The three men looked around for some signs of human habitation, but discovered none. A rough roadway, however, led from the bridge along the base of the precipice towards the fall, which appeared to be about half a mile distant. After a brief consultation they decided to make their way along this road. To be prepared for possible danger they first laid down their impedimenta and unslung their rifles. Then they set off, Forrester leading with the shikari.

After a while the path rose somewhat steeply on the face of the cliff, and they soon saw that it passed underneath the fall itself, the torrent of water forming a gigantic arch. When they arrived beneath this they found themselves in a dim twilight, the glassy sea-green surface of the watery arch reflecting a pallid hue upon their faces. They were perfectly dry, except for some flecks of spray dashed upon them from the base of the fall. At this spot they were three or four hundred feet above the surface of the lake, which boiled and foamed like an angry sea immensely magnified. The din was terrific; even the loudest shout would scarcely have been audible.

At their first entrance into this segmental tunnel Hamid Gul shrank back, appalled by the noise, the falling water, and the immense, tattered sheet of spray that rose from the seething cauldron hundreds of feet below. But seeing that his employers were pressing forward he pulled himself together, and hurried on close at Mackenzie's heels. The width of the path had diminished to a bare three feet, and as the party crept along it they instinctively clung to the wall of rock on their left hand. A strange attraction was exercised by the smooth arch of falling water; on their right, inducing the same kind of vertigo which most people experience when looking down from giddy heights.

So they passed through the furlong of tunnel. A hundred yards or so beyond the eastern end the path began to slope downwards as steeply as it had ascended on the other side, and within a short space the party found themselves once more almost on a level with the lake. Then the path came to an abrupt end, disappearing into the water that washed the base of the perpendicular cliff. Here they halted; it seemed that they could go no farther, that they must retrace their steps and explore in the other direction.

They could not make themselves heard one by another, but Mackenzie

signed to the rest to stand fast; he remembered that beyond the bridge behind them there was no road except that which skirted the lake, and drew the reasonable inference that the path by which they had come must, after all, lead somewhere. It occurred to him to test the depth of the water. Finding that it was no more than two feet, he took off his boots, rolled up his putties, and started to wade. In a few seconds he turned and beckoned to his companions. They followed his example, and on joining him found that he had come to a sharp corner of the precipice, which was cut at this point by an extraordinary rift. At the entrance it was perhaps forty feet wide. The sides were straighter and even nearer to the perpendicular than the face of the cliff bordering the lake. They gazed upwards in astonishment at the immense height. The top was so far above them that the sides seemed almost to touch, leaving only a narrow slit. Peering into the cleft, they saw nothing beyond the first hundred yards or so. Little light filtered through the opening at the top, and the floor of the rift was illuminated more and more faintly as the sides converged.

Our party stood there in mute amazement. Mackenzie was the only one of them who knew anything of geology: a Scot always knows something of everything; and he surmised that the rift was the result of some Titanic disruption of the earth in an age long past. It was as though the mass of solid rock had been rent asunder by a gigantic wedge, impelled by a Cyclopean hammer--such a hammer as Thor wields in the Norse myths.

It seemed of little use to enter the rift. No mortal men could make that their abode. But on passing beyond the entrance they soon found that further passage along the edge of the lake was impossible. The water still came right up to the face of the cliff, and the pathway--if it was a pathway--which they were treading sank ever deeper beneath the surface. There was nothing for it but to hark back, unless they were prepared to swim. Jackson suggested that possibly some side path branched from the rift, leading by a steep zigzag ascent to the summit of this strange precipice.

Retracing their steps accordingly, they turned into the rift, donned their boots, and marched forward. The floor sloped gently upwards, the walls converged until the space between them was barely half what it had been at the entrance. Pressing on, they became aware that the rift was not straight, as they had believed. A sharp bend brought them upon a sight that caused them to halt, peer nervously upward and in front, and tighten their grasp upon their rifles. Three canoes lay tandem against the right-hand side of the rift--harmless objects in themselves, but rather perturbing as indications that men were somewhere in the neighbourhood. They were obviously intended for transporting persons across the lake without the necessity of making the passage under the fall. In the dim light they would scarcely have been visible from the entrance, even had the

rift been straight; the bend effectually concealed them.

Once more the party halted. Shut in as they were by the high, close walls, the sound of the waterfall came to them now only as a dull rumble; but when they spoke it was in whispers. Apart from the risk of being heard by an unseen enemy, there was an atmosphere of mystery and awesomeness that weighed oppressively on their minds.

"What are we to do?" asked Jackson.

"Go on!" Forrester replied, firmly. "We can hardly be seen. The sides are so smooth and straight that no one could perch anywhere to molest us, except at the corners. We must be on our guard there."

"But surely no one can live here! Nothing could grow; there doesn't even appear to be moss on the rock, and the air's as stuffy as in a cave."

"Man, don't argufy!" said Mackenzie. "Straight ahead!"

They continued their course. Every now and again the rift turned sharply to one side or the other, and the smooth floor, unimpeded by loose rocks or boulders, always ascended, more and more steeply as they advanced. Strangely enough, the higher they went the stuffier the air became, and the deeper their sense of oppression, or rather, perhaps, of nervous strain. Mackenzie, who had once been down a coal-mine in Lanarkshire, suspected the presence of poisonous gases.

"There can't be fire-damp," he murmured, "but it may be carbonic acid. Bide a wee while I strike a match."

But this fear was dispelled when the flame burned brightly for a second or two. He extinguished it abruptly.

"Hoots! I'm an ass!" he said. "Someone may have seen the light; and if there are men about, I'd rather see them first than they us."

"My skin is tingling just as if I'd got a grip of the terminals of a battery," Jackson remarked.

"It's uncanny, and that's a fact," said Mackenzie. "But look, man! What's that?" he added, in a startled whisper, clutching Forrester by the arm with one hand, and pointing ahead with the other.

His comrades closed upon him, and peered into the semi-obscurity, their heads almost touching. A little to one side of them stood Sher Jang, impassive as ever, though he held his rifle with both hands, and his muscles were as taut as a bent spring. Behind, Hamid Gul's one eye bulged from its socket as he tiptoed to look over his master's shoulder.

A few yards to their front the rift made one of the sudden bends that formed such strange features of its course. It struck to the right at a sharp angle, so that the wall which had been on their left hand became almost perpendicular to their line of march. On its smooth rocky face, some eighteen or twenty feet above the ground, an extraordinary procession was moving across their line of vision

from right to left, like shadows cast faintly upon a screen. The leading figure was that of a skeleton, clothed about with a misty body shaped like a man in tourist costume: a tall frame, the bones standing out in black relief from the midst of a faint penumbra. Behind this trotted the skeleton forms of a number of almost naked dwarfs, no more than four feet in height, each bearing a spear upon his shoulder. At the rear came a second full-sized figure, taking long strides, like a schoolmaster at the tail of a line of boys. The shadowy surround of his skeleton widened towards the bottom like an academic gown. The watchers held their breath, amazed at the weirdness of the dim shapes, and still more at the manner of their progress. There were no steps to be seen in the face of the cliff, yet the gait of the procession was unmistakably that of men descending a steep stairway. Foot by foot they moved downwards on their diagonal path; one by one they reached the floor of the rift; then, instead of walking along it towards the spectators, they seemed to descend into the earth, and in a few moments disappeared from view. Not a sound had accompanied them; no tramp of footsteps, no clash of weapons.

Drawing a long breath, the white men, tense and watchful, waited a little for some sign of their reappearance, but nothing more was seen. If the strange people had observed the group of onlookers, they had paid no heed to them. At last, Mackenzie hurried forward to search for the steps and the subterranean passage to which they gave access. The rest of the party followed him, save Hamid Gul, who remained as one transfixed, shivering with awe.

When they came to the wall they were thrown into a state of utter consternation. The surface of the rock was wholly unbroken; there was neither stairway nor passage into the ground--the cliff was as smooth as polished granite. They looked upwards, to the right along the rift; they passed their hands over the face of the rock, struck it here and there, probed with their rifles the floor--all was apparently solid. An uncomfortable feeling of creepiness stole over them. What mysterious secret lurked in this gloomy cleft in the mountain?

None of them had yet uttered a word. When Forrester spoke, it was in a whisper.

"Were they shadows?" he asked.

They turned about and looked back along the rift. There was no light between the walls. Far above, the sunlight illumined their summits, a bright streak in the gloom. But no shadow could have been cast so low.

"Och!" exclaimed Mackenzie, shaking himself. "We cannot get to the bottom of yon. Come away!"

Every man of them, without confessing it to the others, was thinking of the singular things they had heard in the forest village. Their minds were oppressed by the villagers' superstitious dread; it required an effort to proceed with the march, leaving this uncanny incident unexplained. But they braced them-

selves at Mackenzie's words. Whatever the explanation of the procession might be, it argued the presence of beings other than themselves in the cleft or its neighbourhood; and the remembrance of their errand nerved them to go on. If Captain Redfern's unfortunate companion were indeed held captive in this mysterious region, it appeared that they must look forward to something more than a straight fight; but they could not allow themselves to be daunted by apparitions, which, after all, might have a simple explanation.

When they resumed their march it was with more caution than before. Despite themselves, they had a sense of being watched, of something impending, almost of helplessness, strange though this sensation was to their robust Western minds. Almost unconsciously they kept closer together, holding their rifles ready in one hand, and unbuttoning their revolvers with the other. Only Hamid Gul walked alone. He followed with trembling knees some yards in the rear, wishing that he had courage enough to run back to the entrance, where there were at least space and air.

They turned to the right with the rift. Soon the walls began to converge, and the twilight grew dimmer and dimmer. At one spot the passage was scarcely eight feet wide. Beyond this it broadened again, and the light improved. Then, with startling suddenness, the silence behind them was broken by a harsh sound that caused them to jump round in a tingle of apprehension. It was like the rattling of heavy chains, followed by a loud grating squeak, and a second or two later by a metallic clang that echoed ominously in the narrow rift. The echoes died away; all was again silent.

Mackenzie had already started back, a vague inkling of what had happened freezing him to the marrow. In the semi-darkness he collided with Hamid Gul, who let out a yell and dropped his rifle, which fell with resounding crash on the ground. The others hurried close on Mackenzie's heels. He reached the narrow passage recently left, and here, in the greater obscurity, he came full tilt against an obstacle that barred the way. His rifle clashed against it, and when his friends joined him they found that their escape was cut off by a huge iron shutter that filled the whole width of the passage.

Mackenzie struck a match, and held it aloft. To their dismay they saw that the shutter was at least twenty feet high. It fitted into grooves on either side and in the floor beneath, which the darkness had not allowed them to see when they passed a few minutes before. Its surface was decorated with an elaborate and fantastic design, the prevailing note of which was a monstrous eye, which glared with a singularly sinister effect in several parts of the pattern. The upper part of the shutter was attached to two heavy chain cables, one on each side of the rift. These cables seemed to disappear into the walls another twenty feet or so above; but from the position of the trapped party, with the poor aid of match-

light, it was impossible to see beyond the points at which the chains appeared to enter the rock. Lighting several matches together, however, Mackenzie held them high above his head, and the flame glinted for a moment upon a dark face peering down upon them over the top of the shutter. It was visible only for an instant, then it was gone; but in that instant the three men felt the culminating shock of amazement. In those features--the high cheekbones, the slanting eyes, the long, thin, grey moustache--they thought they recognised the countenance of the elder of the two Chinamen who had been the companions of their march--the man whom the bemused lad had called Wen Shih.

[image]

The flame glinted for a moment upon a dark face peering down at them from over the shutter. It was visible only for an instant, but the three recognized with amazement the face of the man called Wen Shih.

CHAPTER VII

EUTHANASIA

"Did you see yon?" cried Mackenzie, turning to the others.

"The Chinky!" gasped Jackson, under his breath.

"Och, man! there's no need to moderate your voice. We've no hobgoblins or supernatural beings of any kind whatever to deal with, but just that ruffian of a fellow I've had my suspicions about all along. That's an established fact."

Mackenzie spoke loudly and emphatically; he was indeed a little sore at the recollection of his own uneasiness. To his practical mind the secret stairway and the mysterious procession counted for nothing against the solid fact that here was the Chinaman whom he had mistrusted.

"He has shut us in," he added. "Well, he may be sorry for it yet. We'll just gang on, my laddies."

"But how about getting back?" asked Jackson.

"Eh, now! That's not a practical question. The shutter is a sort of portcullis, you may say, defending a sort of castle. Well, we will assume that this Beresford man is a prisoner in the castle. To get him out, the first thing was to get in our-

selves. That we have done. What's more, we can't get out just at present, and, speaking for myself, I'll not go out without Beresford, if he's alive."

"I'm with you, Mac," said Forrester. "But, after all, we don't know that Beresford is here."

"We don't *know*, but there's good warrant for the suspicion. D'ye ken what I've been thinking? Beresford and the other man happened upon some secret here about, and the inhabitants--Chinese, by the look of it--collared them to prevent the secret getting abroad. That ruffian guessed from our line of march that we were coming here, just out of curiosity, maybe, for he couldn't have known anything about Beresford----"

"Unless he was here at the time, and left after Redfern's escape," Forrester suggested.

"Ah! That didn't occur to me. Anyway, he gave us the slip in the scrub back yonder just to prepare for our reception if we came along, and I acknowledge that the nature of our reception is a disagreeable surprise."

"Whatever the motive for detaining Beresford may be, it applies to us, too," said Forrester.

"True, and therefore we'll have to watch out. It's a difficult situation."

"They might starve us, or murder us, or anything," said Jackson, somewhat nervously.

"There's just one thing against that," returned Mackenzie, "and that's the fact that our carriers are not with us. The Chinky knows that; he'll guess, or discover, that they're waiting for us in the village away yonder, and fear that if we don't return they'll hie back to Dibrugarh, and give the alarm."

"What do you think he'll do, then?" Forrester asked.

"Keep us here until we're starved or cowed into submission, and then let us go under a vow to say nothing at all. But it's no good speculating. We're in the castle; the first thing is to explore it. Come away!"

There seemed nothing better to be done. The party turned their backs on the shutter, and once more marched along the rift. The events of the last half-hour had made Mackenzie more uneasy than he cared to admit; but as the most level-headed of the party he felt the necessity of keeping up the spirits of his companions, and resolutely tried to conquer his misgivings.

They pushed on through the rift, searching the wall on either side for signs of an outlet; but the rock was still as smooth as heretofore. At last a couple of unusually sharp bends brought them to another constricted passage, which, like the one behind them, was closed by an iron shutter. Checked by this, they stood for a few moments in absolute silence, looking at one another without any attempt to disguise their alarm. The distance between the two shutters was, perhaps, 120 yards. On each side rose an unscalable wall. They were prisoners, as it were, at

the bottom of a well.

The silence was broken by a wail from Hamid Gul. It served to brace up the white men.

"Whisht!" exclaimed Mackenzie. "Wait while I strike a light."

He kindled a match, and raised it above his head.

"This shutter is not so high as the other," he said. "We've just got to climb over it."

"How?" asked Forrester. "It's twelve or fourteen feet high, and as smooth as a board. There's nothing to stand on."

"Except our shoulders," Mackenzie retorted. "Here, Sher Jang, you're the broadest of us. Come and stand just here. I'll mount you; then, Bob, you're the slimmest, you swarm up. On my shoulders you'll be able to see over. Take the matches. Keep a look-out, Dick, and if you see anyone above threaten mischief, just fire off your revolver--not to hit him, you understand. Diplomacy comes before war."

Sher Jang stooped while Mackenzie mounted his back, then slowly rose to his full height. Mackenzie rested his hands on the shutter, and Jackson clambered up the human pedestal, and grasped the top of the iron gate.

Next moment he fell back with a stifled cry. Mackenzie caught him in his arms; but his weight was too much for the stability of the column. It tottered, and all three men fell sprawling on the ground.

"The top was red hot!" cried Jackson, lifting himself and rubbing his elbow.

"Hold up your hands, man!" cried Mackenzie, picking up the fallen box of matches. He struck a light and examined Jackson's palms. "Your nerves are all to pieces," he added. "Yon's no red hot, or your hands would be blistered and branded red. There's something in it, though. Look here, Dick!"

They saw a faint purple streak about an inch wide across the middle of the fingers of each hand.

"Any pain now?" asked Forrester.

"No; only a sort of tingle," Jackson replied, feeling a little ashamed of himself. "I was taken by surprise, but it really is hot."

"I'll have a try," said Forrester. "Get up again, Mac."

Once more Mackenzie stood on the shikari's shoulders, and Forrester clambered up as Jackson had done. Forewarned, he did not start back and upset the balance when he touched the top of the shutter; but he removed his fingers from it quickly, and called out that it was certainly very hot--too hot to grasp while he hauled himself over. He slid down, Mackenzie leapt to the ground, and they looked at one another in a sort of despair.

"Can't we blow down the shutter with our cartridges?" Forrester at length suggested.

"We might not succeed, and, anyway, it would be a loss of ammunition we may badly need before long," replied Mackenzie.

"What in the world are we to do?" muttered Jackson, peering about him anxiously.

"The fact is----" Forrester was beginning; but at this moment they were all startled, and yet relieved, at hearing a human cry from above them.

"Who's that?" Mackenzie called, lifting a lighted match above his head. For a moment they searched the face of the rock in vain; but then the light struck dimly upon a head, projecting, as it were, out of the solid wall thirty feet above them. They could distinguish neither shape nor feature, but before the match went out they saw a second head projecting, like a gargoyle from a Gothic wall, close beside the first.

"Who's that?" Mackenzie called again.

"Gentlemen!"

The word floated down eerily; it was as though a gargoyle were speaking; and the voice was that of the younger Chinaman whom they knew--high pitched, yet low in tone, hardly more than a whisper.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the August and Venerable welcomes you to his sanctuary. Uninvited you come, but none the less are you welcome. The August and Venerable will extend to you such hospitality as lies within his means. But it is not meet that armed parties should enter the holy precincts. Be content, therefore; withdraw to the lower gate, and leave your weapons there. When you return, this upper gate will be opened to you, and I shall have the honour and privilege of introducing you to the Presence."

This speech was delivered in the dull, dreamy, expressionless tone which had characterised all the young man's utterances, except in those few tense minutes succeeding his rescue from the elephant--the monotonous sing-song of a child nervously reciting a lesson.

"The 'Presence' is that one-armed rascal beside him, I suppose," whispered Forrester. "The poor weed says what he is told to say. What's our answer?"

"We're in an awkward fix," Jackson began, but Mackenzie cut him short.

"Things aren't so hopeless as that," he said, quickly. "We'll not part with our arms--our only protection. We don't know when we may need them. I'll answer the fellow." Raising his voice, he said: "We refuse to lay down our arms. We have no hostile intentions--we're as meek as lambs--but the shutting of the gates is a dashed unfriendly act, and makes us mighty doubtful about our welcome. Lift this gate, and lead us to the presence of the August and Venerable. We demand an audience with him."

His comrades thought that a more conciliatory manner and more formal phrases might have served them better, but they said nothing. There was no re-

ply from above; they supposed that the young Chinaman was translating to his master, though they heard no sound. It was too dark to see the heads without artificial light; and after a minute or two had passed in silence Mackenzie struck a match, and held it so that its light would fall on the spot where the shapes had been seen. But the wall was blank; the gargoyles had disappeared.

"What's going on now?" Forrester murmured.

"Maybe they're sending someone to work the machinery," answered Mackenzie.

They waited silently, expecting every moment to hear the harsh grating of the rising shutter, and the rattle of the chains. But minutes passed, and there was no sound except the hard panting breaths of Hamid Gul. Gradually, however, they became conscious of a strange feeling of oppression. The mustiness of the air, which they had felt ever since they entered the rift, became impregnated with a subtle new odour. At first they paid little attention to it, merely remarking on it one to another. But presently Jackson began to sway on his feet.

"I feel funny," he said, slowly. "Getting--awfully--sleepy."

"Hold up, man!" said Mackenzie, sharply, as Jackson staggered against him. "Dick, take him by the arm; we'll walk him about."

"If I can," returned Forrester. "I feel uncommonly drowsy, too."

They took Jackson by the arms, and led him down the rift in the direction of the first shutter. A few yards away they passed Hamid Gul, lying with relaxed limbs on the ground. With growing alarm Mackenzie tried to hurry the pace, but his companions became moment by moment heavier on his hands. After a minute or two he let Jackson's arm go without knowing it. In a few seconds more his grip of Forrester loosened, and he walked on two or three paces alone. Then he, too, fell a prey to the overmastering influence of the atmosphere.

[image]

Taking Jackson by the arms, they led him down the rift, and a few yards away, they came upon Hamid Gul, lying with relaxed limbs on the ground.

"Hold up, I'm telling you!" he muttered, staggering and reaching out with his hands.

Next moment, without volition of his own, he sat down on the ground, striving, like a man half drunk, to keep himself erect, and declaring to himself that he was "quite all right." But his hands fell limply to his sides, his body swayed gently, his head nodded, and in a few seconds he, like the rest, was prone in unconscious-

ness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAW OF THE EYE

Some two hours later, Mackenzie awoke, heaving a great sigh.

"Hech! But I've a sore head the morn," he murmured, rubbing his eyes drowsily as he looked around him. The sight of bare blank walls instead of the walls of his bungalow, decorated with colour plates from the illustrated papers, caused him to sit up suddenly and rub his eyes again. It was a minute or two before full consciousness and the recollection of recent incidents returned to him. Then he remembered that his last waking moments had been spent in the rift; but he had awaked in a stone-walled, stone-floored cell, cubical in shape, and ten feet in each dimension.

His comrades, still asleep, lay at full stretch on the floor, on either side of him.

"Eh, Dick! Bob! waken yourselves," he called.

There was no response.

He got up, moved, somewhat totteringly, to Forrester, and prodded him in the ribs.

"Waken!" he called again. "Man, what's wrong with you?"

He gazed anxiously into his friend's face as Forrester slowly opened his eyes. Turning away, he hastened to Jackson, poked him, bawled in his ear, felt his pulse; then, assured that he was not dead, as he had begun to fear, raised him in his arms and shook him vigorously.

"Haven't got the ball, you ass!" Jackson spluttered.

"This isn't rugger, old man," said Forrester with a light laugh, coming to his side. "Wake up and see where the beggars have carried us."

Jackson recovered his wits more tardily than the others.

"His face is green," Forrester whispered uneasily.

"So is yours," said Mackenzie.

"And yours too, by Jove!" cried Forrester, after a good look at him. "What the mischief have they been doing to us?"

"I cannot say. I know that my head is sore."

"I've a headache, if that's what you mean," said Forrester.

"So have I, splitting," added Jackson, sitting up, but still resting his hands on the floor. "By Jinks, the stone is warm!"

"It is that," said Mackenzie, feeling it. "They're wishful we shan't take a chill, by the look of it."

They gazed around their narrow chamber. Walls and floor appeared to be of solid rock. In the centre of one wall was a door of stout timber, without lock or handle. High in another was an opening, like the arrow slits in medieval castles, through which a white light filtered.

"Get on my back, Dick, and keek out," said Mackenzie.

In a moment Forrester was mounted.

"I see nothing but a blank wall twenty feet away," he called down. "And not much of that. It looks like the wall of the rift. I tell you what: this room must be cut out of the wall this side. When you called it a castle, you spoke better than you knew, Mac."

"Ay, so it seems," Mackenzie replied, as Forrester sprang down. "But I'm fair flummoxed. The room's perfectly light, though yon slit isn't more than twelve by two. Where does the light come from? It's greenish, too, which accounts for our delicate complexions. And look! you see that?"

He pointed to the faint shadow of a fourth human figure that passed across the wall opposite to the window. It flitted through their own shadows, and disappeared.

A moment's glance assured them that it had not been cast from without; yet the wall appeared solid, in no degree transparent.

There was no furniture in the room. Silently they sat upon the floor, watching the wall nervously for a return of the mysterious inexplicable shadow. But it did not reappear. The strange light, the stranger apparition, brought back upon them redoubled the uneasiness they had felt ever since they entered the rift, and especially after seeing the ghostly procession on the wall. At that moment they could have believed that they lay in the haunt of some necromancer, whose magic art might manifest itself in terrors unconceived.

"They must have hocussed us," murmured Forrester at length, his thoughts reverting to his last conscious moments in the rift.

"Ay, put us to sleep with some narcotic gas," said Mackenzie. "What'll they do next?"

"What have they done with our men?" said Jackson.

"Separated the goats from the sheep," replied Mackenzie sardonically. "They are evidently respecters of persons!"

"But----"

Forrester's voice ceased. The door had swung open, and there entered two small black men, almost wholly naked, with the uncouth bodies, hideous features,

and coarse woolly hair of the wild pigmy races. Each carried a large bowl, one containing water, the other a sticky mess resembling porridge, and three spoons. Through the open doorway, in a brighter greenish light, the prisoners descried a group of similar negroes, armed with short spears and knives, like the dwarfs of the procession. The two food-bearers laid down the bowls and went out silently, the door swung to, a bolt grated in its sockets, and the prisoners were again alone.

Forrester bent over the larger bowl, smelling its contents.

"D'you think it's poisoned?" he asked.

"No, no," replied Mackenzie. "They wouldn't keep us alive to poison us out of hand. I'm for having a go. We've had nothing to eat since noon."

He spooned up a quantity of the stuff and tasted it.

"Sticky but not bad: would be the better of a pinch of salt. Hunger is the best condiment; dip your spoons."

By the time they had finished their meal and emptied both the bowls the daylight had faded, and the window slit was black. Yet the greenish rays that pervaded the room were as strong as ever. They sat discussing the strange phenomenon. Mackenzie advanced the theory that the rock was phosphorescent, and Jackson claimed that he had disproved it when, after rubbing his hand on the warm floor, there was no emanation of light from his fingers. Presently, tired out, and lulled by the warm close air, they fell asleep.

They were awakened by finding themselves gently shaken. The door had been silently opened, and two visitors were in the room. The prisoners recognised them at once. They were the two Chinamen with whom they had unforgettable links.

"Arise!" said the lad in his hushed faltering tone. "Arise! The August and Venerable commands you to his presence."

"The August and Venerable isn't this one-armed villain after all," whispered Forrester. "We must go with them: there's no help for it."

They noticed that the one-armed man had changed his dress. He wore now a long, white, full-sleeved garment with a green girdle about his waist. He signed to them to precede him through the open doorway. On passing out into a vaulted corridor, which, like their room, seemed to have been hewn out of the solid rock, they found awaiting them an escort of a dozen little black men like those they had already seen, and similarly armed. They followed them through corridor after corridor, the floors of which sloped gradually upward, then into a kind of ante-chamber, and finally into a huge rectangular hall. The greenish light had grown stronger and stronger as they proceeded, and the hall was brilliantly illuminated, though the illumination had no visible source. Like diffused daylight, when the sun has gone down, it came apparently from no definite direction: it was everywhere.

At first the three white men took in no details of the scene before them. They were dazzled by the brightness, oppressed with a sense of mystery, an apprehension of they knew not what, the dead silence that prevailed. But when their first sensations had passed, they gazed about them with a tingling curiosity. The walls, glowing with the all-pervading greenish light, were decorated with Chinese designs. The predominant feature of the scheme was a figure which at first sight might have been mistaken for the conventional Chinese dragon; but, on closer examination, it seemed to the spectators to resemble more nearly the reconstruction of some prehistoric sea-monster, such as European zoologists have attempted on the basis of fossil discoveries. The figures were arranged in a regular order. Some were large, some small, but all were of the same type, and they were rendered more life-like, and at the same time more hideous, by the fact that their eyes glowed with a green light much more intense than the light that filled the hall itself.

Silent though it was, the hall was not unpeopled. Drawn up in two crescent ranks stood, motionless as statues, perhaps two hundred Chinamen, young and old. The cheeks of all alike were clean shaven, but there were differences between the first two ranks. The heads of those in the first were absolutely hairless: their scalps shone like balls of old polished ivory. They were clad in long sleeveless robes resembling ecclesiastical copes, white with an edging of gold, and a large blue monster, like those on the walls, ramping across the middle of the back. The men in the second row were moustachioed, and had a topknot of hair. Their principal garment was a full-sleeved tunic, white also, but without embroidery of any kind. It was among these that Wen Shih, the one-armed Chinaman, placed himself after leaving his young compatriot and the three Englishmen with their escort just inside the doorway.

The silent assembly faced a huge dais or throne at the farther end of the hall, rising six or eight feet from the floor. It was of Chinese design; the material of which it was made shone like gold; and its surface was marked with images of the symbolic monster, sculptured in high relief.

The Englishmen noticed that, immediately opposite the throne, there was a gap in the ranks of the company, eight or ten paces wide. Beyond this gap--that is, nearer to the end of the hall at which they had entered--stood a low pedestal, like the pedestal of a statue. But there was no statue upon it. Nor was the throne occupied. The eyes of the silent throng, indeed, appeared to be fixed on a doorway in the wall behind and above the throne. It was covered with a cream-coloured hanging of some rich material, ornamented with monsters embroidered in gold. From it to the rear of the throne a broad stairway led.

The hush of expectancy which brooded over the whole assembly seized upon the three strangers. Their fascinated eyes were drawn as by some magnetic

attraction to the curtained doorway. Not one of them was tempted to speak: they were possessed by awe the same in kind as that which holds the worshippers in some vast cathedral.

Presently they became aware of a trembling in the air immediately above the throne, like that which is sometimes seen above the funnel of a locomotive engine at rest. By degrees a screen of mist, delicate as muslin, formed itself in front of the throne, the outlines of which became blurred and were finally blotted out altogether. There was a momentary rustle, like the breaking of surf upon a long shore; then the same deathly stillness; the Chinamen had bent forward simultaneously with the precision of trained soldiers, until their brows touched the floor. Of all the men in the hall, only the three Englishmen at the end stood upright upon their feet.

They gazed in mute amazement, tensely awaiting the explanation of this extraordinary scene. Presently they caught the gleam of gold through the shimmering screen; the mist slowly dispersed; the outlines of the throne were once more clear and distinct; and they thrilled as with an electric shock when they beheld, seated motionless upon the throne, a remarkable figure.

It was the figure of an old, old man, low in stature, bent and frail, but indued with a certain impressiveness and majesty. A long ivory-hued cope, stiff with gold, and emblazoned with purple monsters, descended to his feet, concealing a frame which the three spectators divined to be spare and emaciated. His head was covered with a towering head-dress like a bishop's mitre, but loftier, fantastically shaped, and gleaming with gold and jewels.

But the eyes of the beholders were drawn away from his gorgeous trappings to his countenance. Ivory pale, lined and wizened with great age, it was rendered strangely impressive by the eyes, which beamed with the lustre and brilliance of youth. His glance passed over the prostrate forms of the assembly, and fastened for one brief moment on the three straight figures at the end of the hall. Then in a clear bell-like voice, surprising in so old a man, he uttered one word. The men prostrate below him rose to their feet; there was a brief pause; then for the space of several minutes a sort of litany was chanted, the old man reciting a sentence, the others making responses in monotone. There was no gesture, no movement save the motions of their lips.

When the litany came to an end, at a word from the old man Wen Shih left his place in the second rank, and approached the Englishmen. He made them understand by signs that they were to accompany him to the foot of the throne. Moving as under a spell, they passed through the gap, scarcely conscious of the eyes of the men around, and halted a few paces from the seated patriarch. Wen Shih returned to his place. All was silent as the grave.

The old man gazed fixedly at them for a moment, and his searching look,

bright as an eagle's, yet cold and paralysing, filled them with a chill foreboding. His lips moved, and in spite of themselves they started in amazement as they heard the first words that fell.

"What brings you striplings here?"

[image]

His lips moved, and in spite of themselves they started as they heard his first words: "What brings you striplings here?"

The face was Chinese, beyond possibility of error; but the words were English, slowly spoken, with only a faint trace of a foreign accent. The tone was authoritative, compelling, that of one who would not be gainsaid. Forrester, always the readiest of the three, felt instinctively that no prevarication would avail, that the best chance of coming safely through whatever ordeal was before them lay in perfect frankness. Steadying his voice, and looking up into the old man's face, he explained, so rapidly that his words as it were tumbled over one another, that he had come with his comrades for the purpose of liberating a fellow countryman whom they believed to be held captive in this region, and he begged that the prisoner might be surrendered, and that all might be suffered to depart in peace.

The old man's countenance was utterly expressionless. It gave as little sign as a mask of what was passing through his mind. Forrester having ended, somewhat breathlessly, the low mellow voice spoke again.

"All are welcome to the Temple of the Eye. I repel none, I invite none. Those who come by their own choice, or are led hither by the hand of Fate, must abide by their choice, or by Fate's decree. The rest of their lives hereafter must they spend in the service of the Temple, fulfilling such offices as they may be best fitted to undertake. That is the Law of the Eye."

His utterance was slow and deliberate, like that of a man searching for words at one time familiar, but now half forgotten. The cold dispassionate tones struck a chill upon the listeners' hearts. They had in them the ring of finality, of inexorableness: the old man might have been the very mouthpiece of Fate pronouncing doom.

The three men felt the utter hopelessness of argument or protest. Their spirits, under the spell of that calm silvery voice, died within them. When Wen Shih came again to them to lead them back to their former station, they accompanied him with the tranced meekness of men drugged for the gallows.

A few moments after they reached the end of the hall they were roused from their stupor by the appearance of a small black man, led between two bald

white-clad Chinamen like those in the first rank. His limbs were quivering, his teeth chattered; his staring eyes regarded the awful Presence on the throne with the same helpless terror as a bird fascinated by the baleful eye of a snake. The priests of the Eye lifted him on to the pedestal in a line with the gap, and fastened his collapsing form upright to a light framework which they slid up from the base. Then they placed themselves on either side, and made three low obeisances to the venerable figure on the throne.

The man on the left uttered a few sentences in Chinese, and bowed again. His fellow followed with a word or two. It seemed to the Englishmen that they were giving testimony against the quivering figure on the pedestal above them. The second man ceased, and made his obeisance; then both took places quietly at the ends of the front row near the gap.

The Englishmen expected that the criminal, if such he was, would be called on for his answer to the charges made against him. But the old man said never a word. Amid a breathless stillness he arose slowly and majestically to his feet. Was he about to pronounce judgment? The Englishmen wondered what the punishment was to be. Recollections of the horrors of Chinese torture made them quake; but there was no sign of instruments of torture, no movement in the silent ranks, except that they turned and faced the victim. Their garments rustled, then all was still as before.

The old man moved his head from side to side, the movements being so slight that they might have passed unnoticed by any one observing him less closely than the three Englishmen. Presently all motion ceased. The silence seemed even deeper than before. Then, with startling suddenness, from a point in the old man's head-dress, immediately above the centre of his brow, a swift thin beam of bright green light flashed along the hall, over the gap, past the pedestal, and on to the wall. It was gone in a moment. A low sound like the indrawing of breath ran through the assembly. A flicker of emotion stirred the stolid faces of the Chinamen; a look of horror distorted the more expressive faces of the negrito guards. And the Englishmen were suddenly aware that the pedestal was vacant. The limp shrinking form had vanished; only a little dust hung in the air.

While the Englishmen were still in their amazement, the ranks faced about again, and the two priests who had led the victim to the spot drew near to it with the solemn gait of acolytes. One carried a golden trowel, the other a small gold-handled brush. Standing on either side of the pedestal, the one swept a quantity of dust on its surface into the trowel held by the other. The latter, holding the trowel at arm's length in front of him, bore it slowly towards the throne, and after a profound obeisance offered it to the old man, and withdrew. Lifting his skinny right arm, the old man extended the trowel towards the assembled priests, moved it from side to side, lightly sprinkling the dust on the floor, and in his cold

clear voice spoke with impressive deliberateness a single sentence. Once more the assembly fell prostrate, the air above the throne quivered, and the mist gradually rose before it, blotting it and its motionless occupant from sight.

CHAPTER IX

THE MONSTER ON THE WALL

The three friends scarcely noticed what followed on the disappearance of the old man. The priests filed out quietly, each rank by a separate door. Only Wen Shih remained. He came slowly to the end of the hall, threw a contemptuous glance on the young lad his late companion, who had fallen swooning to the floor, and signed to the Englishmen to follow him. Accompanied by the negrito guards, they quitted the hall, and marched back through the vaulted corridors. They were not, however, taken to the room which they had lately left. Mackenzie was led off by himself to a somewhat smaller cell, and locked in there, Jackson and Forrester being left, meanwhile, under charge of the guards. They in their turn were separately incarcerated. None of them knew anything of the fate of Sher Jang and Hamid Gul. The scene which they had just witnessed, the climax of the series of mysterious happenings of the past few hours, had completely overwhelmed them. They were incapable of resistance, of protest, even of thought: everything was subdued to a shuddering horror.

Mackenzie found himself in a chamber differing from that which all three had previously occupied in two respects: its size, and the ornamentation of one of its walls. At first he was hardly aware of this; but recovering his composure by and by in the quiet of his solitary cell, he noticed that the wall opposite the window slit bore a representation of the strange monster which was depicted on the walls of the hall. But here again there was a difference. The hideous creature had, in addition to two eyes normally placed, a third, in the centre of the forehead, in the same position as the spot on the old man's head-dress from which the annihilating beam of light had sped. The cell was dimly illuminated by the mysterious green light, but the monster's third eye glowed brilliantly, a lozenge of vivid green.

Here, at last, Mackenzie thought, was the explanation, or rather the confirmation, of the villagers' vague statements about the Eye. It was a symbol of the power presiding over this mountain community. He remembered having noticed a lozenge-shaped ornament on the head-dress of the Old Man of the Mountain; it

was from this ornament that the beam of light had appeared to shoot. But what was the origin of this mysterious light? What was the secret of its tremendous devastating force, which in a single moment had shattered the little black man into a few handfuls of dust?

Mackenzie shuddered as he recalled the scene. This wizened old man, who appeared in a mist, and into a mist vanished, who was revered as a deity, who was judge and executioner in one--who was he? The sound of his clear silvery voice rang still in Mackenzie's ears. He remembered the cold remorseless words of his speech. All who came to the Temple of the Eye were doomed to spend the rest of their lives in its service! What did that mean? What service was exacted of the hapless wretches enthralled to such a master?

He remembered too that the Old Man had wholly ignored Forrester's reference to the Englishman who, it was suggested, had fallen into his hands. Had the dust of Beresford's destroyed body been already scattered on the floor of this horrible temple, or had he too been preserved for a lifelong servitude? Was he perhaps at this moment lying in a cell, alone, crushed in spirit, asking himself the same unanswerable questions?

Agitated beyond endurance, Mackenzie got up and paced the floor. As he walked, he found himself glancing more and more frequently, and each time for a longer period, at the monster's green eye. It exercised a basilisk attraction: by and by he was unable to withdraw his gaze from it. He tried to look elsewhere, to think of other things; but always his eyes wandered back to the one spot. It glowed upon him with a sort of hypnotic fascination, leering, as it seemed, mocking him, a mute unwinking witness of his despair. Unable to endure the torment, he turned his back upon it, threw himself on the floor, and buried his face in his folded arms. And there at last, worn out in body and mind, he fell into a sleep broken by frightful dreams.

When he awoke his hand moved by force of habit to his pocket for his watch. It was gone. He felt in all his pockets: they had been emptied. Nothing but his clothes was left to him. Looking up at the window slit, he saw sunlight streaming in; the greenish hue had almost disappeared. He rose, and with a strong effort of will forced himself to turn towards the wall on which the monster was painted. He almost shouted with relief when he discovered that the third eye, though still aglow, was much dimmer than it had been in the night. The sun had conquered; the eye's baleful attraction was gone.

Presently the negrito guards brought him his breakfast of water and the same glutinous porridge as on the previous day. He spoke to them, first in English, then in Hindustani, but they answered nothing; if they understood him, they gave no sign of it. An hour or two later they returned, accompanied by one of the shaven priests, who indicated that he was to follow them. To refuse, he knew,

would be vain; but he shivered with dread lest he were summoned to witness another scene like that of the night. He found, however, that his fears were not justified. His guards took him through miles, as it seemed, of narrow corridors hewn in the rock, always ascending, and brought him presently to an arch through which the sunlight poured. Passing out into the open air, he saw with surprise that he was at the foot of a steep stairway cut in the face of the rift. The steps, about a foot wide, led to the summit, perhaps a hundred feet above. A rope, carried down a kind of handrail, intervened between the passenger and the abyss yawning more than a thousand feet below.

The guards signified that he was at liberty to ascend the stairs, and left him. At first he shrank from attempting the climb; his experiences, and his restless night, ill fitted him for any task that demanded steady nerves. But Mackenzie was a man of grit; freedom, the fresh air, the pure sunshine braced him; his curiosity was keen; and at length, steadfastly averting his eyes from the dizzy depth below, and clinging firmly to the rope, he began to mount the stairway.

He gained the top, and an unexpected sight met his wondering eyes. Before him, and on either side, stretched a broad plateau, rising in the far distance to the mountains of the snowy range, whose peaks, miles high, glistened dazzlingly in the sunlight. That which surprised him most of all was that the plateau was cultivated. It was divided into many rectangular fields, on which crops of all kinds were growing, and herds of cattle grazing. The fresh green of the vegetation was refreshing to his eyes after the greyness of the barren rock on which they had rested of late. He saw now why the community required supplies of wood from the outside. There were no timber trees. At his right hand lay an extensive orchard, but nowhere were to be seen trees that could be felled for fuel or building.

In three directions there were groups of huts, and people were moving about in the fields. They were evidently of many races. There were dwarfish negritos like the Temple guards, Chinese, Tibetans, Nagas and other hillmen. There were women and children, but these seemed to be all negritos or hill-folk: no Chinese women were among them.

Mackenzie remained for several minutes at the top of the rock stairway, scanning the whole prospect. He was quite alone, apparently free to move in any direction he pleased. No one took notice of him. When he moved a few paces towards the nearest group of huts, he looked around, expecting to find that someone had been told off to watch him. The fact that such was not the case induced a sense of utter hopelessness. If he was not guarded, the reason must be that escape was impossible. But he promised himself that, granted his liberty thus, he would not rest until he had thoroughly explored the plateau, and assured himself that there was not in one direction or another an outlet into the larger world.

The sight of Sher Jang approaching him, spade in hand, recalled him to the present, and he hurried to meet the shikari, whose usually expressionless countenance lit up at sight of him.

"It is good to see that you are alive," he said. "What did they do with you?"

"They locked me up, sahib, in a warm room, and this morning brought me here. A shorn-pate put this spade into my hand, and bade me dig. I have lost caste; it were better to die: but he told me I am a slave, and shall remain a slave while life lasts."

"And Hamid Gul?"

"I know nothing of him, sahib. I have not seen him since we left the pit below. There are many of my countrymen here; they are all in bondage; and they quake and shiver when they speak of the Eye."

"I don't wonder," Mackenzie murmured. "What do they say of the Eye?"

"They speak of it as of some unknown horror, sahib. No one has seen it: they say that no man sees it and lives. They declare that the one-armed stranger had both his arms, like you and me; one day he had two, the next, when he came up, he had but one. They tell also that men have gone from this place down into the depths yonder, and have never been seen again. It is Fate: who can stand against it?"

At this moment a Chinaman dressed like those who had formed the second rank in the Temple came up to Mackenzie, held out a spade, and signed that he was to join a group of men who were digging in a neighbouring field. Mackenzie thrust his hands into his pockets and turned his back upon the man. To his surprise there was no insistence, no attempt at compulsion: the priest, as he supposed him to be, went away without a word. And then he saw Forrester hurrying towards him from the head of the stairway.

"Where's Bob?" were Forrester's first words.

"I was going to ask you that," Mackenzie replied. "I haven't seen him."

"They locked me up alone," Forrester went on, "and I never passed a more awful night. That eye!"

"The monster's on the wall?"

"Yes. Had you one too? I couldn't look away from it: try as I might, the frightful thing seemed to draw my eyes to it against my will. What unnameable devilry are they playing on us?"

"Making good!" Mackenzie replied with a grim tightening of his mouth. "The Old Man of the Mountain said we were to stay here for the rest of our lives: he means to terrify us into knuckling under. But I vow----"

"For any sake say nothing," Forrester implored earnestly. "I feel as if the very air were spying on us; and who knows, if we say anything against him, he won't burn us to powder as he did that poor trembling wretch!"

"An easy death: better than lifelong slavery. All these folk you see about are slaves."

"But why have they let us come up here?"

"To prove we can't escape, no doubt. But I'll not----"

"Hush! Look at that fellow slinking by!" Forrester cried in an urgent whisper.

It was one of the shaven priests walking towards the orchard.

"Let's follow him," said Mackenzie. "There's no check upon us; we are free men still."

Sher Jang had returned to his digging. The two friends set off pace for pace after the priest. He did not enter the orchard, which was in no way railed off, but skirting its upper end, he drew near to a long low building of stone, with open doorways a few feet apart. It reminded Mackenzie of the rank of connected cottages often seen near engineering works in his own country, except that it was characteristically Chinese in form and decoration. The priest entered one of the doorways and disappeared. As they passed, they heard a dull incessant hammering from within the building.

"Sounds like a smithy," said Forrester. "I wonder what goes on there?"

A little beyond the building, rose a sort of pagoda, three stories high, but not so truly pyramidal in shape as the memorials frequently seen in China. It was surrounded by a walled enclosure, the wall being too high for them to see over.

"It's not big enough to be the Temple," Mackenzie remarked. "I guess it's the residence of the August and Venerable. We'll go on; maybe we'll see the Temple later."

"I don't want to see it," Forrester said with a shudder. "I never want to see it again."

"Eh, but I do," Mackenzie returned. "I wish to know all I can about this place. The look of the outside can't do us any harm."

But no such building came in sight. The only thing that attracted their attention was a stream flowing from north to south across the plateau. It passed through the walled enclosure of the pagoda, and flowed away between embankments in what they supposed to be the direction of the falls. They were thinking of following its course, when a horn sounded stridently in the distance. At the signal the priests emerged from their dwellings, and marched in file towards the stairway. Mackenzie and Forrester followed them, out of curiosity. They descended the stairway one by one. Soon afterwards another file, the moustachioed priests, came up from the opposite direction. None of them so much as glanced at the two young men standing aside to watch them. When all had gone down, Sher Jang came up to his masters, and told them that the horn blast was the signal for the midday meal. If they wished to eat, they must descend, for no food was given on

the plateau to the men from below.

"I'll not go down till I must," said Mackenzie firmly. "To exchange this fresh air and sunshine for the close atmosphere below--no, I'll fast for the day rather."

The two remained foodless for the rest of the day. No one interfered with them. They rambled where they pleased. Every now and then they spoke to one or other of the Indians in the community, asking them how they had come to the place and what their experiences had been. A few had stumbled upon the rift by accident; most had been entrapped, kidnapped, or inveigled by the priests. All were utterly broken in spirit, and lived in hourly terror of the Eye, the mysterious and dreadful something of which rumour spoke, but which none had seen.

Among those whom the Englishmen addressed was an old Indian, who told them that he had been captured with his little daughter several years before on the outskirts of his village. He was a zamindar, a man of substance and of some education. He invited the two men into his hut.

"Lilavanti!" he called as they entered.

From behind a curtain that divided the apartment a tall beautiful girl of sixteen or seventeen years came forth. She wore no veil. A white dhoti was wound about her body. Her raven-black hair was bound with a fillet of pearls, and a string of pearls depended from her neck. She bowed deeply as her father introduced the visitors as English sahibs, placed cushions for them, and then seated herself modestly in a corner.

"I have no hope for myself, but I still dream that my daughter may even yet be released from bondage," said the zamindar, looking with pride at the girl. "We are not ill-treated, you perceive; we make no complaints on that score. So long as the slaves fulfil their appointed tasks they suffer nothing at the hands of the priests. But our life is overshadowed by a cloud of uncertainty as to what the future may bring forth."

"What is the meaning of it all?" Forrester asked.

"No man knows, but I will tell you, sahibs, some conclusions I have come to. The negritos, the original inhabitants of this plateau, are a dwindling race. Fresh blood is required in order to maintain a sufficient population for the cultivation of the soil. Prisoners are brought here for that purpose, and for another which I know not. At irregular intervals men are taken down the steps yonder: we never see them again. The strange thing is that no Indians are thus removed, but only Chinese and negritos. And there is another strange thing: the Chinese prisoners of humble rank are set to work on the fields and are never taken underground; but at intervals, sometimes long, sometimes short, young men of noble birth and high education are brought here. At first they spend their days here above, as you are doing to-day, and descend at sunset; but a time comes, sooner or later, when they descend for the last time and are no more seen. And from the first

they are listless, dazed, scarcely sane. If they speak, it is as though they were the mouthpiece of others. Some of them have conversed with me in my own tongue; but I have never been able to learn from them any particulars of their past life, or of the nature of the place underground where they pass the nights. Always they speak with the utmost reverence of the priests, whom they profess to be their kind friends."

"Like our young Chinaman," Forrester remarked to Mackenzie.

"Ay; he is the latest victim, it seems. Have you ever seen one of our countrymen here?" Mackenzie asked.

"One only. I shrank from telling you. He came up daily for eight or ten days: I had many conversations with him. It is four days since I saw him: I shall never see him again."

"Do you know his name?"

"It was never mentioned: he was simply the Sahib to us."

"Beresford, there's hardly a doubt," Forrester said to his friend. "And is there no means of escape from this plateau?"

"None. If you think of attempting it, you may spare your labour. I have traversed the plateau from corner to corner. Behind are the mountains; if you could climb them you would only die of cold and hunger. In the centre is a mighty river, that pours over the edge of the precipice. To cross it is impossible. In the other direction the plateau ends in a sheer precipice thousands of feet deep. The rift you have seen. That is the only entrance and exit. How its floor is reached from above I know not: I was made insensible there below, and when I revived I was here."

"And has no one, absolutely no one, at any time escaped from the regions below and returned here?" Mackenzie asked.

The zamindar looked round apprehensively, as if he feared that the walls might hear him. When he spoke it was in little more than a whisper.

"You are an Englishman," he said. "I can trust you. One man escaped; one only: a negrito: it was five days ago. He came to my hut one night for shelter. I knew him. When he left here a year before he was young, plump and bright-eyed; when he returned he was like an old man. He was mad. I had learnt something of his language, but I understood little of what he said, so wild and broken were his words. It was clear that he had lived among unspeakable horrors."

"What became of him?" asked Forrester.

"When my daughter and I were absent in the fields the priests came and took him. He is gone: we shall never see him again, and I am in constant fear that I shall suffer for harbouring him. In his ravings he spoke of the Eye, and shook like a man in ague."

The two Englishmen looked at each other. The same thought had occurred

to them both: this was the negrito whom they had seen suffer the punishment of the Eye.

"Shall we tell him?" Forrester asked.

"No, no: don't let us terrify the old chap," his friend answered. "His dread of the unknown is depressing enough as it is: if we told him about the Eye, every moment of his life would be an agony."

They were still conversing when a horn sounded thrice. The zamindar rose from his seat.

"That is the signal for returning below," he said. "The sun is setting. I hope that I may see you to-morrow, sahibs."

His visitors rose to leave the hut, and bowed to the young girl. The zamindar politely escorted them to the doorway. Forrester was a pace or two in the rear. He felt a touch on his arm, a small object was slipped into his hand, and the Indian girl whispered in Hindustani:--

"It saves from the Eye, sahib. The little black man gave it to me."

[image]

"It saves from the Eye, sahib."

She stole away behind the curtain, and Forrester, after a momentary pause, put the gift into his pocket and followed his friend into the open air.

"Shall we refuse to go down?" he said.

"We shall get no food if we do. Besides, we must find out what has become of Bob and Hamid. At present my brain is in a whirl; everything is so bewildering; maybe light will dawn by and by."

At the head of the stairway two priests were awaiting them. One signed to Mackenzie to descend, and followed him. When they were out of sight, the other indicated that Forrester was to go down. Singly they passed through the silent corridors, and were locked in their cells, each alone.

CHAPTER X

THE UNDERWORLD

Meanwhile, what of Jackson and Hamid Gul?

The former, more nervous and highly-strung than either of his friends, had suffered still more poignantly the malignant influence of the monster's eye. Like them, he had been taken that morning to the foot of the stairway, but the sight of the dizzy ascent had proved too much for him. He could not bring himself to face it, and returned to his cell, where he had remained all day in miserable solitude, his meals being brought to him at intervals.

Hamid Gul, the first to fall into unconsciousness, was also the first to revive. He came to himself as he was being carried along the corridor to the cell allotted him, and immediately began to plead for mercy on the ground that he was only a servant, only the humble cook. One of the priests, who understood Hindustani, had reasons of his own for testing the man's skill. Accordingly Hamid, after a night of solitude, was conducted to the kitchen attached to the priestly buildings on the plateau, and ordered to prepare one of his most appetising dishes. The man was as quick-witted as he was timorous. Like many native servants, he cherished a dog-like devotion for his master, and instantly made up his mind to employ his utmost art in the hope of ingratiating himself with his captors to the advantage of the whole party. He concocted one of Forrester's favourite dishes, under the eye of the priest, who, having made him eat a portion, as a precaution against poison, carried the rest away. Returning presently, he said "It is well," and informed Hamid that he was to consider himself attached, at any rate temporarily, to the kitchen staff. Hamid was delighted with his success, and would have been wondrously elated if he could have foreseen the remarkable events that were to spring from his clever cooking.

Forrester had dreaded the approach of night, when he would again have to encounter the unwinking glare of the eye. As soon as he had finished the meal brought to him by two negritos, as before, and was locked in, he took from his pocket the small article given him by the Indian girl. It looked like a tightly folded sheet of paper, greyish in colour. It crackled slightly in his hand. Opening it, he found it to be a thin sheet of some unfamiliar substance, about eighteen inches square. The only material to which he could compare it was mica; but on holding it between his eyes and the window, through which came the reflected glow of the setting sun, he discovered that it was more transparent than mica, but less than glass. From the first he had felt little confidence in the statement of the Indian girl. If this strange substance was a defence against the Eye, why had not the little negrito kept it for himself? Now that its transparency was proved, he lost even the slight hope which the girl's words had inspired. If pervious to daylight, how could this flimsy sheet give any protection against the incalculable force that must emanate from the Eye?

When darkness fell, and the green glow from the eye of the monster on the wall dominated the little apartment, Forrester, rather from curiosity than with any

belief in the efficacy of the screen, held it before his eyes. To his amazement, it was absolutely effective. The glow diminished to a faint luminosity. All its searching brilliance, its compelling power, was gone. He moved the screen aside to make sure that the light was still there, that it was not eclipsed by some other agency. He was immediately undeceived, and again held the screen between his eyes and the monster. What appeared to him still more remarkable was that, protected as he was now from the light, he felt little of that terrible depression of spirits which had tortured him on the previous night.

Mackenzie's suggestion recurred to his mind. The monster's eye was part of the fell machinery employed by the Old Man of the Mountain to crush the spirits of his victims. He relied upon its influence sooner or later to terrorise their minds into utter subjection to his own. From his one night's experience, Forrester felt that the desired effect would supervene soon rather than late: no mortal man could long withstand the mysterious force which the glaring eye exercised upon him. He instantly resolved to divide the screen next day into three portions, if that were practicable, and give one secretly to each of his comrades, supposing that Jackson appeared on the plateau. The fragments might avail to arrest the gradual breaking down of their will-power.

Early next morning, before he could attempt to carry out his design, the door was opened, and the guards made signs that he was to follow them. Expecting to be led again to the stairway, he rose with alacrity. But his guides soon turned off into a passage branching from the corridor he had traversed on the previous day, and his heart sank with misgiving as he recognised presently the ante-chamber giving access to the Temple.

He was detained there for a few minutes until joined by Mackenzie and Jackson. The aspect of the latter struck him with anxious foreboding. Jackson was deathly pale: his features were pinched, his eyes dull and ringed with dark shadows.

"The Eye!" he murmured, and a shudder shook him.

There was no time for speech between them. They were led into the Temple, where the priests were already assembled, ranged in two rows as before. There was the same period of silent waiting; the same prostration to the floor when the mist ascended before the throne; the same gradual revelation of the August and Venerable. Again they chanted the solemn litany, and during the performance the Englishmen grew faint with apprehension lest it were to be followed by a ghastly scene like that which they had formerly witnessed.

The last response was uttered; an ominous silence brooded over the place; then Mackenzie and Forrester saw with a shiver of horror, between two priests advancing, the shrinking form of Lilavanti. She was lifted on to the pedestal, and silently bound to the framework; then the shaven figure on her left made his gen-

uflexions and began to declare her crime. The Englishmen, of course, understood not a word of his recital; they were indeed as though frozen stiff to the floor. But when the first accuser had come to an end, and his colleague had bowed thrice to the awful figure on the throne before taking up the tale, the girl turned her head slightly and threw upon Forrester a glance in which he read a last anguished plea for help. A hot thrill surged through him; he felt his cheeks flush; and, clenching his fists, he sprang forward, into the gap between the ranks of the priests, and strode swiftly up the floor towards the throne.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried, raising his hands aloft.

There was not a movement among the priests. So well disciplined were they, or so terrified at what might ensue upon any infraction of the customary order, that each man remained steadfast in his place. If any looked at the profane audacious stranger, it must have been from the corners of his eyes.

At Forrester's impulsive movement Mackenzie took a step or two forward, under the instinctive prompting to support his friend. But reflection brought him to a standstill. He could do nothing at present: the prudent part was to await the issue of Forrester's intervention: perhaps his aid would be more valuable later on.

Forrester had started almost at a run, looking straight at the immobile countenance of the Old Man on the throne. But the nearer he drew to it, the slower he went. Under the steady gaze of those piercing eyes he felt his courage oozing away; he almost forgot his purpose. He struggled against the paralysis that seemed to be creeping over him; but when, standing immediately beneath the throne, he tried to raise his arms, they fell limp to his sides; when he tried to utter the burning words of entreaty on his lips, he could only mutter and mumble. And when the August and Venerable rose slowly in his place, and Forrester saw more clearly than before the lozenge-shaped ornament on his head-dress, from which the destructive beam had appeared to flash forth, he felt within his soul that he was about to share with the Indian girl the same annihilating doom.

A breathless stillness filled the Temple. Then the Old Man spoke, and his words seemed to Forrester like drops of ice-cold water falling on his head.

"You offer yourself to judgment in place of the girl?"

Unknown to Forrester, such substitution was frequently practised in China. He scarcely understood the meaning of what he had heard. Commanding his voice with an effort, he whispered:--

"Spare her! Do her no harm!"

The blazing eyes pierced him through and through; but the Old Man's voice, when he spoke again, was cold and emotionless as ever. Mackenzie, at the end of the Temple, wondered whether the wizened figure on the throne retained the least drop of warm blood in his veins, the least remnant of humanity.

"You oppose your puny strength to the Law of the Eye?"

"No, no," Forrester whispered. "She is a young girl; have mercy upon her!"

"The Law of the Eye knows no mercy," the calm voice went on. "Whoso transgresses, shall he not be cut off, even in the flower of his youth? In ignorance you have profaned this holy place: the Law ordains that the ignorant shall be chastised until he becomes wise. Its ordinances shall be fulfilled from generation to generation, even until the world dissolves. You shall be made wise, and when wisdom is yours, you shall once more, and once only, behold the Power of the Eye. You shall see that fair flower of maidenhood wither and become dust; then shall you yourself suffer the selfsame penalty, and your dust shall mingle with hers."

Speechless, fascinated, Forrester stood as though transfixed, scarcely conscious that Lilavanti was reprieved. The quivering screen rose before his eyes; the figure of the Old Man seemed to flicker and dissolve into it. He was unaware of what went on behind him--that the girl had been released from the pedestal and taken out; that Mackenzie, his joy at his friend's respite swallowed up by dismay and dread of the future, was led away to his cell; that Jackson had been carried out in a swoon; that the priests had passed out in silent procession--all but one.

Presently he rose at the touch of a hand. Staggering to his feet, he saw that the vast chamber was empty save for the priest at his side. Unresisting he allowed himself to be led through the hall into the ante-chamber, where the negrito guards, trembling in every limb, were awaiting him. They filed out before him into the corridor, and he followed them, supposing that they were leading him back to his cell. Unheeding, he did not know that they passed his bolted door. Only when they stood back, and he saw, in the dim green light, a stairway descending in the rock before him, did he become aware that he was in a part strange to him. Turning round, he asked the priest where he was. The mute immobile figure merely raised an arm and pointed downwards at the stairway.

[image]

The mute immobile figure merely raised an arm and pointed downwards at the stairway.

Forrester was incapable of resistance, protest, expostulation. He felt helpless as a child, compelled to obey the behest of a stronger will. Slowly he began to descend the stairs. The negritos followed in a line, their spears slanted on their shoulders, and the priest in his wide flowing robes brought up the rear. Forrester, if he had been able to think, might have remembered that he had seen just such a procession passing like shades across the wall of the rift.

Down, always down, they went, until, after treading perhaps a hundred

steps, they came to a long smooth stairless slope, steep enough to demand an effort lest the walking pace became an involuntary run. Presently there were more steps. At the foot of this second stairway the narrow, shallow tunnel--for it was no more--turned sharply to the left, and the floor again sloped, but this time upwards. Another series of stairs appeared. On ascending this Forrester, at length becoming awake to his surroundings, noticed that the greenish light was growing perceptibly brighter. He went on, up another incline, the floor of which was covered with a yielding deposit, apparently of dust that had fallen from the roof. Yet another flight of steps had to be mounted. Then the tunnel broke abruptly to the right, and a few paces more brought Forrester, more and more bewildered as he more completely recovered his wits, to the opening of a large cave on his left.

He glanced into the entrance, and was amazed to see a sheet of water, rippling a little in the greenish glow, and extending beyond eyeshot. The water washed the walls; but there was a narrow ledge of rock that lay uncovered, skirting the wall on the left. Forrester turned about to enquire whether he was to proceed along this ledge, and discovered that the negritos had halted some twenty paces in his rear, blocking up the tunnel. Behind them the taller figure of the priest stood with arm outstretched towards the cave.

Taking this as a command to go on, Forrester wheeled round, and walked towards the ledge, wondering with sickly apprehension what lay in the dim greenish mist beyond, and why his escort had not accompanied him. Glancing to the right as he reached the ledge, he saw, in a recess commanding the entrance to the cavern, a group of armed negritos and a priest standing behind them. There could be no doubt that they were placed there as a guard: the recess was a sort of wardroom.

He proceeded along the ledge, and came in about twenty yards to a gap, bridged by a broad plank with a handrail on the side towards the lake. He crossed this, went along the continuation of the ledge on the farther side, and arrived suddenly at the entrance of another cave, larger and more lofty than the first, rising to a vaulted roof like the nave of a cathedral. Its floor of rock was a foot or two above the level of the lake. Entering it, he saw a number of human figures, seated at the further end. One of them rose on seeing a stranger, and after a brief hesitation, stepped hastily forward to meet him. With a gulp and a half articulate cry, Forrester quickened his step, and in a few moments was grasping a firm hand,

and looking amazedly into an English face.

CHAPTER XI

ALCHEMY

"Redfern got through?"

The eager question was like a knife in Forrester's heart.

"Yes, Redfern got through," he repeated wearily. "Your name is Beresford?"

"It is. Where is Redfern? Have you disposed of that ancient scarecrow above?"

"I am a prisoner like yourself."

The elder man gasped.

"Has he cast his spell over all of you?" he cried. "A British force conquered by a conjuring trick? For heaven's sake explain yourself."

"There is no British force. It is a long story I have to tell you."

"Come along over here, then. There's only one poor idiot who *can* understand you besides myself, and he's so desperately cowed that I doubt whether he *will*. Now, sit here: you won't catch cold: the whole place is warm, as I daresay you have discovered."

Beresford's brusque manner, quick speech, and robust personality acted as a tonic upon Forrester. Already he felt invigorated. The mystery of the place evidently had no terror for this sturdy Englishman. Forrester had vaguely expected that the archaeologist would be old, dry, bent, and spectacled: the actual man was of middle height, athletic in build, under forty years of age, with a heavy brown beard and moustache, and the large deep eyes that are the index to a mind at once eager and reflective.

They squatted side by side on the rocky floor. Beyond them, Forrester caught sight of the drooping figure of the young Chinaman, Wen Shih's companion, and several older Chinamen, clearly prisoners. Near the entrance to the cave were two negritos with spears, and, in a pagoda-shaped sentry-box, a priest of the second order.

"I didn't choose my company," said Beresford with a laugh. "Now, forge ahead; I won't interrupt you if I can help it."

It was soon evident that to listen long without interrupting was impossible to this impetuous spirit. He was patient enough while Forrester related the

strange manner of his meeting Redfern, only ejaculating "Poor dear old chap!" when he heard of the captain's illness. But as Forrester was recounting the preliminary stages of the expedition, he broke in:--

"Cut that, if you don't mind. Hitch on again at your discovery of the rift."

"Yes; there's a good deal in between, but--well, the people here were warned of our coming by Wen Shih, who----"

"Wen Shih! Who is he? I suppose he comes into the part you've skipped. Wait though: I know the name. Of course; that broken-hearted young fellow over there mentioned him; seemed in two minds whether to hate or love him. But he has only been here since yesterday: he's young, and I hope to make a man of him yet. But I'm interrupting: do go on."

Forrester was too much pleased with this cheery being to resent being hustled. He went on to relate the closing scenes of the party's journey through the rift, their awaking in the rock chamber above, and the dreadful ceremony in the Temple. His voice faltered as he spoke of the beam of light and its effect.

"Ah! That's new to me," said Beresford more gravely than he had yet spoken. "That's dashed bad. You're sure it wasn't a Maskelyne and Devant trick?"

"Quite sure. There could be no possible doubt about it."

"That's what they really mean by the Eye, then. I took it to be the eye of that ridiculous creature on the wall. That old villain above is more ingenious than I fancied him. I regarded him as a mere clever bag-of-bones togged up--a sort of music-hall comedian with a straight face. But please go on."

The rest of Forrester's story was soon told.

"Well, don't be downhearted," Beresford cried, gripping his shoulder with the rough vigour of a friendly bear. "The August and Venerable sent me here too, to learn wisdom: we'll learn it together. I have been here three days----"

"Did you come down a staircase, with negritos and a priest behind?" asked Forrester, remembering the strange procession across the rift wall.

"I did. There's no other way. But why did you ask?"

"Because we saw you--what looked like half-dressed skeletons, slanting down the wall. When we found that the wall was solid, without steps, we were flabbergasted."

"I daresay," Beresford rejoined with a smile. "You will learn more wisdom here than our ancient friend upstairs reckons for!"

"But why didn't you feel the same ghastly creepiness as we did?"

"I'll tell you. It was *because I knew what the old villain was up to.* That knowledge was a wonderful talisman against his tricks. And what's more, *he didn't know that I knew*, or, after what you have told me about his murderous Eye, I should without doubt have been resolved into molecules before this. Like you, I was allowed to go up daily to the plateau--by the way, they employ a marvellously ef-

fective system of intensive cultivation there--like you, I refused to dig. Unluckily one day I lost my temper with one of his bald-headed priests: it doesn't matter why; and I knocked the fellow down. They hauled me into the Temple, and tried to lift me on to that pedestal you spoke of, supposing no doubt that the green-eyed monster and the surroundings generally had crumpled me up--that mist, for instance, a magnificent bit of stage management. But I sent one of the fellows spinning with my right and the other with my left, and marched straight up to the throne--it's pure gold, by the way--and shook my fist in the August and Venerable face, telling him what I thought of him and his crew. I am bound to say he stood it well. He didn't blink an eyelid; there wasn't a tremor in his silvery old voice when he reeled off, in surprisingly good English, a rigmarole about the Law of the Eye. I told him I didn't care a tinker's curse for the Law of the Eye. That was enough to rouse him, but the wonderful old creature wouldn't be roused. He simply yarned on about learning wisdom, and the Power of the Eye, shrouded himself in his vapour and disappeared like a dissolving view. Then I was brought here."

"I wonder you came!" Forrester exclaimed, envying the speaker's boldness, and burning to hear the secret of it.

"Well, I wanted to see all there was to be seen," Beresford replied simply. "I didn't know, of course, that I couldn't get back; and I might have acted differently if he had given an exhibition of the Power of the Eye for my benefit: I suppose there was no criminal on hand at the moment. As soon as I got here I saw that his intention was to give me a stronger dose of his horrors; he is a perfect epicure in punishments. But there was no occasion for panic. I've known Redfern for twenty odd years: he was my fag at school: and I would have given long odds that he would worry through somehow, send up a relief party and give the old reprobate what-for. I've every confidence even now that he will--if he lives. We may be here longer than I expected; but we can stand two years of it, perhaps three."

"You mean that, even if we are not taken above and pulverised, we are in mortal danger here?" Forrester asked.

"Certainly; but not of instant death unless we make fools of ourselves. The length of the process depends on your constitution. Not one of those poor wretches yonder has been here more than four years, and that's exceptional. That young fellow, the last-comer--his name is Wing Wu, by the way: did you ever hear such a name?--he will hardly last out a year: he hasn't the stamina for it."

"But what is the mystery, then?" asked Forrester, astonished at the calmness with which this intrepid fellow seemed to envisage a certain death. "People have lived much longer than four years underground."

"Never in such a dungeon as this. Come with me."

He led Forrester across the cave until they came to a spot whence the floor

shelved down steeply to the wall. That part of the wall which was below the general level of the floor was brightly luminous, and on its green surface Forrester saw, as on a screen, the shadowy forms of fishes and aquatic reptiles flitting hither and thither. Watching them curiously, he was astonished when, at one and the same moment, they dispersed with a rapidity betokening terror, some to the right, some to the left. For an instant the screen was left blank; then there appeared upon it a monstrous skeletonised form, somewhat resembling the fantastic creatures depicted on the walls of the Temple, and on the wall of his own cell. It combined in one shape all the most hideous features of the alligator, the rhinoceros, and the dog-fish immensely magnified. Involuntarily Forrester started back as the figure came close up to the wall, and seemed to be looking through it, as the fish in an aquarium look through the glass of their tank. But it was a shape only; its eyes could not be seen.

"What is it?" Forrester asked in a whisper.

"I don't know," his companion responded. "It is not one of any of the species of ichthyosaurus that I have ever seen; but it is liker that reptile than to any other known creature."

"But isn't that extinct? Don't they find merely the fossil remains of it?"

"Who is to say that any creature is extinct? Scarcely a year passes but some explorer finds, in some remote neglected region, what is to him a new type, but in reality, no doubt, dates back to an antiquity beyond computation. This hideous creature seems to be the last of his kind; I have seen no sign of a mate; and his extinction would not be much of a loss."

"How can we see him at all, through the wall--just as we saw you coming down here three days ago?"

"Does no explanation occur to you?"

"Well, of course I have heard of X-rays, and things of that kind; but----"

"Exactly. Excuse my interruption, but I know what you were going to say. You were going to speak of cathodes, and vacuum tubes, and phosphorescent screens, and----"

"I wasn't," said Forrester: "I never heard of them."

"It comes to the same thing," Beresford went on imperturbably; and Forrester felt a little sorry that the man of cheery good fellowship was for the time sunk in the man of science. "Here there is none of the elaborate apparatus of the experimenter; but Nature has been experimenting through ages beyond count. What do our men of science know of the real nature of the X-rays? Next to nothing. They can produce them, that is all. And here, before our eyes, we have phenomena produced, not by man, but by the Great Artificer of the universe. Those creatures are swimming in the lake which you skirted just now. Their images are cast in some marvellous way upon this particular portion of the wall. I know no

more than you the explanation, but…. My dear fellow, pardon me: this is not a lecture room. Come, I have something more to show you."

They recrossed the cavern, which was as broad as it was high, and turning a corner, were confronted by the arch-like opening of a passage. It was much more brightly illuminated by green light than the cavern out of which it led. Passing under the arch, the two men walked quickly up the passage, which twisted to right and left at every few yards, and inclined gradually upward.

"I feel very rummy," said Forrester after a while: "the sort of tingling you have before a severe thunderstorm."

"I feel it too," his companion responded: "not so intensely as you, perhaps. The thing is to keep as tight a hold on yourself as you can--as you ought to have done when that old sinner above hypnotised you."

"But----"

"Now don't talk. We shall have plenty of opportunities of discussing him, and hypnotism, and a thousand and one things. Take a grip of yourself, and *will* that the mephitic influence shall not affect you. You won't thoroughly succeed, but the effort will be good."

The feeling of tenseness increased as they advanced. To Forrester it seemed as though a hot band were tightening round his temples; but he kept silence. Glancing at Beresford, he perceived on his face an expression of grim, almost savage, determination. They went on, the passage becoming lighter moment by moment, until, after they had walked a few hundred yards, it widened out into a cavern, much less spacious than that which they had left, but almost as light as open ground at noonday. At the edge of it Beresford halted.

"Stand here, and watch," he said.

In the centre of the floor there was a large square slab of some greyish substance--the only spot in the cavern through which the green rays did not, as it were, percolate. It was about three feet each way, and stood a few inches above the floor. Upon it lay a coil of thin yellow-green chain, like an immense brass watch-guard tinged with verdigris, and an oblong lump about a foot in length, and of the same colour. A few feet above, a stout bar of yellow metal projected from the wall of the cavern, having at its free end, exactly over the centre of the slab, a wheel over which another chain hung.

These objects first caught Forrester's attention, no doubt because they formed a group in the centre of an otherwise bare floor; but they held it only for a moment or two. His eyes were diverted to a living figure. From a hitherto unnoticed recess on his left hand came a bent, decrepit, cadaverous Chinaman, to all appearance very old, carrying a thin square plate, in colour a dirty greenish-grey. He toddled slowly towards the slab, looking neither to right nor left, laid the plate upon it, and passed through a hole in the centre of the plate what seemed

to be a small catch in the aforesaid lump of metal. This latter he attached to the chain hanging over the wheel.

This done, he moved to one side, and standing at a distance of about ten feet from the slab, pulled at the chain which lay upon it, and which, as Forrester now saw, was fastened to a stout ring in its upper edge. The slab moved on hinges slowly towards the Chinaman, and as it rose from the floor, a shaft of pale green light, blinding in its brilliance, shot up to the roof, fourteen or fifteen feet above, causing the two Englishmen to start back and retreat some paces into the passage. Forrester was conscious of an intensification of his nervous excitement. His ears buzzed; his skin tingled as if he were in an electric bath; his impulse was to cover his eyes and rush headlong to escape the terrible glare and its psychical accompaniment. But seeing Beresford venturing back by degrees, he exerted his will to the utmost, and followed him.

[image]

A shaft of pale green light, blinding in its brilliance, shot up to the roof.

The Chinaman, who was probably at the outset less nervously organised than they, and was certainly inured to the conditions, was carefully paying out the chain over the wheel, with its weighted plate, into a hole in the floor. As Forrester now perceived, the two chains were one, which was much longer than had appeared when it was coiled up. When it was stretched to its full length, it rose vertically from the slab to the bar, ran through hooks in this for a few feet, then descended perpendicularly over the wheel. The Chinaman drew back, and leant against the wall in the relaxed attitude of one waiting. To the Englishmen, in this overpowering atmosphere, the period of inaction seemed an hour: it was really about five minutes. Then the Chinaman approached the chain, taking care to remain as far as possible from the hole, and with careful deliberateness hauled it in, moving backward as he did so. Forrester waited with feverish impatience as it clinked inch by inch over the wheel. When at last the square plate came to the top, the Chinaman raised it until there was room for the slab to pass beneath it, and prevented it from slipping down over the wheel by hooking the chain to the wall, leaving, however, the greater part of the chain free.

Then, with a quickness all the more surprising because of his slow movements hitherto, he rushed with bent head at the slab, gave it one vigorous push, and darted back to the wall, catching at the chain in time to prevent the slab from falling violently. When it was settled in its place, and the blinding glare was shut off, the old man sank on the floor as if to rest after tremendous exertions.

At first Forrester felt a dull disappointment. Without a definite expectation, he had anticipated some striking phenomenon as the result of this elaborate performance. The plate, whose upper surface was towards him, seemed after its long descent to be exactly as it was before: there was no change in it, nor had it brought anything up from the pit into which it had been plunged. But after a few minutes had passed, the Chinaman turned it over, and Forrester was mildly surprised to perceive that the under surface had changed its colour. It was now greenish yellow, like the chain, the bar, and all the other parts of the machinery. In his half-dazed condition he did not suspect the extraordinary character of the transformation.

The Chinaman having reversed the plate, fastened it again to the chain, and went through the same series of careful movements as before. During the second period of waiting, Forrester, prompted by his companion, followed with his eyes the vertical path of the shaft of light from the hole to the roof. He noticed there an aperture, corresponding in size to the hole. A little fine dust was falling from this aperture, like soot from a chimney, into and around the opening of the pit, the minute particles dancing and glistening like the motes in a sunbeam.

When the plate came up the second time, its colour was the same on both sides. The Chinaman unhooked it, carried it across the cavern into the recess, and reappeared with a similar plate, dull and lustreless as the first had been.

Beresford drew Forrester away, and hurried him back through the passage, saying nothing until they regained the larger cavern. Then he halted, clutched the lapels of Forrester's coat, and said:--

"Well, what do you think of that?"

"I don't understand," Forrester replied, something in his companion's manner convicting him of stupidity.

Beresford smiled.

"I don't wonder," he said. "You have seen what the alchemists from Trismegistus to Roger Bacon spent their lives in fruitless efforts to discover, and what Paracelsus would have given the world to see. You have seen lead transmuted into gold! That is the Old Man of the Mountain's secret. Come along to my particular nook: I will tell you all I know."

CHAPTER XII

EXPLANATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

"I wish I had my pipe," growled Beresford as Forrester sat beside him against the wall of the cavern. "Good cut-bar is wasted on the desiccated old anatomy up above. However! ... Redfern and I, as you know, had gone to Chinese Turkestan for a few months' excavating. You have heard of the sand-buried ruins of Khotan. No? Well, seven or eight hundred miles north-west of us, between the vast Taklamakan desert and the icy Kara-Kash ranges, there is an oasis, stretching some three hundred miles from east to west, known as the oasis of Khotan. You think of an oasis, I daresay, as a verdant, beautiful spot. Khotan is not that. There is verdure: the people grow crops; but a great part of the district is simply dust. During long periods of time the sand of the desert has swept across it, destroying, and yet preserving, cities that were once the flourishing centres of an advanced civilisation.... That smacks rather of the lecture room, I'm afraid. Lecturing is my shop, of course.

"Well, not to bore you, excavations have been going on at Khotan, bringing to light highly artistic objects--vases, frescoes, coins, ivories, and so on--which prove that it was long ago the seat of an Indian Buddhist civilisation. Redfern and I had looked forward to making some interesting finds, but we never dreamed of the one we did actually make. We were poking about in a heap of decomposed rubbish and humus, among fragments of pottery, bones of animals, chips of rotten wood, copper coins and what not, when I suddenly spotted a painted tablet like nothing we had yet come upon. I picked it up, and, scraping away at the accretions of siliceous matter that defaced it--my dear fellow, the mere thought of it sets me all of a jigget even now--under that layer, I say, I found a strip of paper about eight inches by three, torn at one corner, and covered with a few lines of writing in what we call cursive Central-Asian Brahmi.

"It was a beautiful specimen at least twelve hundred years old, and valuable enough on that account; but when I came to decipher it--if one can jump out of one's skin, I nearly did so. It was a letter, apparently from father to son, a sort of death-bed farewell, and it gave detailed directions for a journey to the far side of the Himalayas--that is to say, the southern side--to a spot where lead was transmuted into gold! Redfern pooh-poohed it, chanted 'Rowley, Powley, gammon and spinach' like a schoolboy, and when I ventured to suggest there might be something in it, was so rude that I reminded him of what I should have done twenty years ago if my fag had cheeked me. However, I was very patient, and after much persuasion I got him to agree to make a start for the place on the off chance that the story was something more than a fable.

"We set off with a miscellaneous crew of Turki natives, following the very explicit directions of the paper. But the country was so extraordinarily difficult, and the hardships of travel so great, that our escort deserted one after another. We replaced them where we could with fellows picked up en route, Tibetans most of

them; but these too, when it came to crossing the passes of the Himalayas, funked it, and ultimately we were left with a single follower, a Tibetan, a regular brick of a fellow.

"I won't tell you what we went through; after all, we couldn't expect a walk over! Unluckily, the paper was torn at the corner, as I said, and I believe the missing portion described the exact locality of the spot we were making for. Without it we were at a loss, and wandered a few miles farther south than we ought to have done, until we fell in with some little forest people who told us about a mysterious region beyond a gigantic waterfall, which they were afraid to approach because of the Eye. That seemed promising! We made tracks for the fall, just as you did; we found the rift, marched up it, saw the canoes, and flattered ourselves that we should before long be in a position to verify or disprove the ancient legend.

"I led the way; our Tibetan came next; Redfern brought up the rear. We kept a good look-out, of course; but had no suspicion of danger until I heard the clang of the shutter behind me. They had dropped it a minute too soon. The Tibetan and I were shut in; Redfern was shut out; they hadn't seen him, fifty yards or so behind, round the bend. What followed was pretty much as you described your own experiences. I had just time to fire off my revolver in a way that Redfern would understand as a warning, before the gas overcame me. My Tibetan was already unconscious: I never saw him again.

"Next day they took me into the Temple, and I had a very interesting interview with the August and Venerable. As I told you, he did not turn on the Eye for my benefit; indeed, he was very courteous and suave, and I didn't pay much attention to his exposition of the Law of the Eye. It was only when I had committed the unpardonable offence of knocking down one of his priests, and he sent me down here, that I thought him anything but a plausible old humbug with ogreish tendencies.

"Prepared as I was, his little hypnotic tricks with the green eye had made no impression on me. The general atmosphere of mystery, and what I learned from the people on the plateau, convinced me that he was hiding some precious secret below stairs, and the sight of his golden throne made me suspect its nature. Never in my life was I better pleased than when they brought me down their subterranean stairs to learn wisdom! And I hadn't been here an hour before my suspicions became certainty. That Chinaman yonder will be engaged all day in letting lead plates down into the pit, and drawing them up pure gold. The plates are brought down from above: they explain the knocking you heard from the building near the old iniquity's pagoda. There is not a tool of any kind here: nothing but chopsticks, even, for eating our food; the lead is cut and hammered into plates above. The first day I was on the plateau I saw some of the prisoners staggering to that building under heavy loads. I conjecture that the Old Man has

confederates somewhere outside, in China probably, who supply him at intervals with the lead, and receive the gold in return."

"It sounds incredible," exclaimed Forrester, interrupting his companion for the first time.

"The word 'incredible' ought to be banished from our vocabulary," Beresford rejoined emphatically. "Nothing is incredible. They'd have said the same thing only thirty years ago about petrol engines, wireless telegraphy, and aeroplanes. I am convinced that the search for the Philosopher's Stone, which baffled the alchemists for hundreds of years, was not the absurdity we have been taught to regard it. In some far distant age, someone discovered that Nature herself turned the base into the precious metal; the fact was rumoured abroad, though the scene of the transmutation was never allowed to become known; and the alchemists wasted their lives in trying to do artificially what had already been done by natural process. Why, aren't our chemists at the present day groping in the same direction? Don't they tell us that all terrestrial things are merely forms of the same ultimate element, or manifestations of the same ultimate force? Doesn't every fresh discovery point that way?"

"But how is it done?"

"I don't know; the Old Man doesn't know; nobody knows. In that pit yonder, a hundred and fifty feet deep, as I calculate, there is a bed of some substance that possesses this marvellous property--call it radio-active if you like. It can't be radium, for the emanations of radium produce sores on the body, as you know, and these wretched Chinamen have no sores. Its effect, from what you tell me--and I confess your news astonished and appalled me--is far more terrible. Evidently exposure to its direct ray causes instant demolition--annihilation is not the word; dust remains. Proximity to it brings about a sapping of the will; you yourself felt that in your cell; I feel it too. In the cavern yonder the effect is intensified. This mysterious power causes the mind to decay and the body to wither. How old do you suppose that Chinaman is?"

"He looks about seventy."

"He is twenty-eight! I don't know it from himself; he has no memory, cannot even tell you his name. But one of the others is his cousin--looks forty and is actually twenty-two. He has been here a year, taking his turn with the rest at the work; they have a day each. And there's a mystery about the whole organisation which at present I can't fathom. All the prisoners here engaged in the horrible work are young Chinamen of good family. I was told that on the plateau. Why does the old villain employ none but his own countrymen? I shall find out by and by; I haven't been here long enough to learn much; the poor wretches are so mentally abject that I have to go slowly with them. I do know this: that they are all brought in by priests of the second order. When one dies--their bodies

are cast into the pit--he is immediately replaced by another. It seems that some of these priests are constantly prowling about the country, snatching up likely subjects here and there, some to recruit the labourers on the plateau, others for this diabolical work below. Your old Indian told me that every now and then a priest of the second order shaves his moustache and head, and enters the ranks of the first, after which he never goes into the world outside. It suggests that they are promoted after they have bagged a certain number of prisoners. How the priests are themselves recruited I don't know. They are all celibates; I suppose the Old Man has emissaries out proselytising. But these are all conjectures: I hope to find out a good deal more for certain before we get away."

"You know how to get away, then?" Forrester asked eagerly.

"I haven't given it a thought!" was the placid answer. "I pin my faith to old Runnymede--Redfern, Ruddyweed, Runnymede; you twig the process?"

"But if he doesn't come?--if he is dead?" cried Forrester, too much concerned with actualities to be interested in the evolution of nicknames. "We can't get down to the rift, even if we escape from here like the negrito."

"What negrito?"

"Didn't you know? One escaped the other day, got on to the plateau, and took refuge with the old zamindar. He was caught, and I believe it was he that we saw destroyed by the Eye."

"Dear me! That is very remarkable. I hadn't the least idea escape was possible. We must discover how the little fellow managed it, though it's of minor importance beside other things we have to learn. For instance, knowing what we do of the tremendous destructive power of that mysterious substance below ground, how did old what's-his-name above contrive to imprison a portion of it in his mitre without atomising himself? Clearly there must be *some* things that it doesn't affect--like that slab yonder."

"Why, I remember! Look at this!" Forrester exclaimed, taking from his pocket the crumpled sheet which he had found so useful in his cell. Unfolding it, he went on: "It was given me by the Indian girl, who received it from the negrito. She said that it saved from the Eye. When I held it between my eyes and the monster on the wall I could scarcely see the glare. It was a godsend."

"Marvels upon marvels!" cried Beresford, fingering the crackling sheet curiously. "We must look into this. But here comes dinner: we shall have plenty of

time!"

CHAPTER XIII

A DRY BONE

The dishes containing the midday meal were brought to the prisoners by the two negrito sentinels, who received them from the guard at the further end of the ledge. The food, abundant in quantity, consisted of a variety of Chinese viands, strange to the Englishmen's taste, but not unpalatable.

"The Old Man feeds us well," Beresford remarked, handling his chopsticks dexterously. "He doesn't want to hasten Nature's destructive work by starving us. Drinking-water, by the way, is got from a little stream that trickles into the lake just round the corner. I confess I shouldn't care to drink the water in which that antediluvian monster disports himself. We'll take a look at him presently--if we get a chance, for he appears to be rather shy: I suppose he feels hopelessly old-fashioned, or perhaps he has an aristocratic pride in his long descent, and scorns the company of such new creatures as mere men."

"Why isn't the place more stuffy than it is?" Forrester asked. "Where does the air come from?"

"That puzzled me at first, but I discovered the other day that there is a constant current of air, slight, but quite perceptible, over the surface of the lake, through this cavern, and into a narrow cleft which I'll show you by and by. There must be a passage into the upper air. The temperature is rather too high to suit me; but the air is pure enough, and many of the dungeons in medieval castles were much worse places--barring the peculiarly oppressive effect of the stuff below.... You don't get on very well with your chopsticks. Like everything else, they require practice."

"One thing I can't make out is why we are allowed such freedom. You seem to be at liberty to move about as you please, talk to the prisoners--you speak Chinese?"

"Yes, but only out of earshot of the priest in his sentry-box yonder. I don't want him to blab to the August and Venerable--not that it matters, perhaps. The explanation of our freedom is, of course, that it is only such freedom as birds have in a cage. The passage by which we came is barred by the guards. There are no tools or implements of any kind which could be used as weapons; in fact, there's

nothing here but ourselves and a few bamboo rods yonder against the wall, which I fancy must be used for keeping the sentry-box in repair. It's rather dull work for the priest, sitting there all day alone and mum; a new fellow comes every day."

After dinner Beresford led Forrester back to the transmuting cavern, and across it into a passage similar to that by which they had reached the spot. It was a cul-de-sac, except that at its further end there was a narrow cleft in the wall. The opening was barely a foot wide, and the sides were of solid rock. There were slight marks which seemed to indicate that at some time or other an attempt had been made to enlarge the opening by chipping; but the marks were very old, and it was clear that the task, if attempted, had been abandoned as hopeless. The cleft had a slight upward slope, but looking along it, Forrester saw no sign of daylight, nor did he hear any sound from the further end, which was not visible. They both agreed that no human being could possibly squeeze himself through so constricted a passage.

Returning to the outer cavern, they went to the entrance and stepped on to the ledge outside. They peered across the gloomy lake, but failed to discover the monster whose image they had seen outlined on the wall.

"He is not at home to-day, evidently," said Beresford. "Well, we have exhausted the objects of interest: all that we can do for the rest of the day is to sit on our bunkers and 'tell sad stories of the death of kings' or anything else you like. Later on I'll tackle the prisoners again. I try to stir them up a bit and get them to talk, without much success so far except with Wing Wu and his cousin. They are so horribly depressed, poor wretches! By Jove! I do wish I had my pipe."

It was impossible to gauge the passage of time. The successive days, as Beresford explained, were marked only by the arrival and departure of the guardian priests, and by the cessation from work of the man in the smaller cavern, who returned to his companions when a certain number of the leaden plates had been changed into gold. These were placed in charge of the priest on duty, who superintended their removal by the negritos when relieved next day.

That night, Beresford found the two younger Chinamen a little more communicative than they had been before. Wing Wu, indeed, evinced much pleasure in meeting Forrester again, and talked to him with a certain eagerness in English. He was the eldest son of a mandarin, he explained, and had kept a few terms at Oxford. Wen Shih, who had passed with distinction the innumerable examinations inflicted on Chinese literati, had been for a few months his father's secretary. In some subtle fashion he had obtained a commanding influence over the young man. Always courteous and agreeable, he enjoyed the complete confidence of his master, and gradually Wing Wu found himself consulting the secretary in every circumstance of his life, however trivial, until he lost all independence of judgment and even of action. He was at Wen Shih's beck and call, did his behests even

against his own will, and felt that Wen Shih dictated the words he uttered, and arranged his very thoughts.

"As I half suspected," said Beresford, who had been listening intently, "these peripatetic priests are accomplished hypnotists. Under hypnotic influence a susceptible subject will declare black white, swear that his own blood is ink, and imagine himself his own grandfather, or any other absurdity. Go on, please."

Wing Wu explained that one day Wen Shih announced that he was going a journey, and that the lad was to accompany him. The command was obeyed unquestioningly. All the details of the journey were a blank to Wing Wu until the adventure with the elephant, which seemed to have shocked him temporarily into his right mind. Here Forrester took up the tale, describing the peculiar dazed sensation which both he and Jackson had experienced once or twice on the march.

"He was trying his powers on you, of course," said Beresford. "Your friend Jackson was the most susceptible of the three, Mackenzie the least. You may be sure Wen Shih gave a full account of his experiments to his august master, and I can imagine the old villain taking a fiendish delight in sapping away at Mackenzie, the toughest of you. I only wonder he didn't send Mackenzie down here. We'll see if Chung Tong can tell us any more."

He addressed the cousin in Chinese, trying with infinite patience to allure his mind from the present circumstances to his past life. Chung Tong's story, such as it was, told haltingly, resembled Wing Wu's in almost every particular. He added a detail which Beresford seized on, keeping the man's wandering attention fixed on it as firmly as possible. It came out that for many years past there had occurred at intervals mysterious disappearances in his family. Young men in the twenties had left their homes suddenly, leaving no clue to their destination, and never returning.

"A light dawns!" cried Beresford, in unacademic excitement. "The Old Man must have a spite against this particular family, and wreaks it upon them by stealing away these youths, doing them to death in this fatal laboratory of his. But why?--why? What have they done to incur vengeance so horrible?"

But no further information could be elicited from the prematurely aged young Chinaman. His enfeebled brain was exhausted by its unaccustomed groping into the past. Beresford did not press him, but worried the problem, as a dog worries a bone, for hours before he slept.

Next morning, the priest whose spell of duty had concluded, after a brief conversation with his newly arrived colleague, signified that Beresford was to accompany him on his return to the upper quarters. Forrester shook when he understood.

"Must you go?" he implored, the scenes in the Temple appearing luridly before his mind's eye.

"I shall go," Beresford replied tranquilly. "Buck up, my dear fellow. The August and Venerable won't demolish me yet. I expect it's a little cat-and-mouse performance. What if I bell the cat!"

"At any rate do take the screen with you!"

"Not at all. I don't want to lose that. We haven't discovered its secret yet. If I *shouldn't* come back--well, keep up your courage. Pin your faith to Redfern: I needn't say any more."

Forrester wrung his hand, and watched him pass along the half ledge, across the crazy bridge, over the rest of the ledge and into the passage beyond. At the entrance Beresford turned and waved his hand, smiling with the serenity of a man whose mind is at ease.

Two or three hours went by. Forrester paced up and down the cavern in uncontrollable agitation. The thought of losing this cheery companion was torture. He wondered with a carking anxiety what had happened to Mackenzie and Jackson--to Hamid Gul, too, the faithful servant whose little odd turns of phrase assumed almost a pathetic winningness as they recurred to his mind. But always his thoughts came back to Beresford; his imagination focussed that solitary figure confronting the cold, implacable personification of Fate on his golden throne.

Many times he went to the entrance, not heeding, unheeded by, the mute effigy in the sentry-box, and gazed across the lake into the opening beyond. For what seemed an eternity no vision of the lithe sturdy form came to gladden his eyes. But on one of these occasions his anxious ear caught the dull tramp of many feet, and presently, at the head of a negrito escort, appeared Beresford himself.

"Back again!" he shouted, his strong voice rolling over the lake.

Forrester met him at the entrance of the cave, and clasped his hand in a nervous grip.

[image]

Forrester met him at the entrance of the cave.

"I've had quite a good time," said Beresford, linking arms. "The Old Man has been puzzling his wicked old head over my tablet, and he'll puzzle till doomsday for me! He orated solemnly, of course, about the Law of the Eye, and very cleverly hinted, without actually saying so, that the Law demanded an exact translation of the Brahmi writing. I told him, quite politely, to go to Jericho. He, quite politely, regretted that I had made such a poor use of my opportunities of learning wisdom. A mischievous impulse seized me to give him a shock, so I let out a few home-truths--in Chinese! Believe me, he didn't turn a hair: I don't believe he has one to

turn. He scored there, but on the whole I think we may consider it a drawn game. He recommended me to persevere in the pursuit of wisdom, wrapped himself in his mist-blanket, and no doubt crept back like a disappointed spider to his web."

Beresford found next day, however, that the Old Man's politeness had its reverse side. When the new priest arrived, he signified that the Englishman was to do a day's work in the inner cavern.

"It's not meant in kindness," Beresford remarked to Forrester, "but I couldn't have wished for anything better. I shall work quicker than the Chinamen, and when my tale of bricks is complete I shall have a good part of the day to myself. Lend me that screen of yours, will you?"

Forrester waited impatiently for the day to end. When Beresford returned, very white and tired, he said:--

"I've something to tell you. Give me forty winks after supper and I'll be as fresh as a lark."

A little later, in their quiet corner, Beresford began:--

"That slab! I'm convinced that it's nothing but a sort of cement, made of the dust that has fallen from the roof, and that this screen is of the same material. I believe that the mysterious force from below, while it turns lead into gold, makes powder of all other substances exposed to its rays. This dust is no longer subject to its influence, and forms a shield against it. But for the dust, it would have bored a hole right through the roof to the upper air ages ago; but the coating of dust on the sides and roof of the cavity has preserved it. Of course, the slight earth tremors that are constantly occurring, unnoticed by us, shake down particles of the dust, and leave portions of the rock surface exposed to the action of the rays. So there's a very gradual process of eating away going on, and in course of time the rock above the cavern will be pierced clean through."

"I see," said Forrester. "The force must have been in action for ages, so that it may be ages before the hole is made. Anyway, it doesn't matter to us."

"I'm not so sure of that," returned Beresford quietly. "If we could only hasten the process, and get a ladder, we might pay our venerable host a surprise visit one of these days, for I'm pretty sure, thinking over the direction of the passages we came through on the way here, that we're almost directly under the Temple. That itself is underground, or it wouldn't glow with the green light; and you may be sure it's connected with the Old Man's pagoda. It would give me great joy to intrude upon his solitude, and see him in his bath, so to speak."

"I'd rather give him a wide berth," said Forrester. "Anyhow, it doesn't seem possible."

"We have no ladder, and certainly we can't emulate the Earth-shaker, and engineer a series of mild earthquakes expressly for our own convenience. Ah well! like the heathen, I daresay we imagine a vain thing. What's that line of

Virgil?--*animum pictura* ... you remember the passage; where Æneas is looking at the frescoes in Dido's palace, 'and with an empty picture feeds his mind.' Well, better feed the mind even on fancies than let it starve, like these poor Chinamen. And now for sleep."

It became clear that the Old Man had set himself pitilessly to undermine Beresford's courage. Instead of taking his turn with the Chinamen in rotation at the enervating work in the inner cavern, Beresford was given the task every second day. Robust as he was, and endowed with great strength of will, the electric atmosphere wrought its devitalising effect on him, and Forrester, after a week, noticed with sickening dread that his eyes were less bright, his cheeks less rounded, his voice less resonant. An offer to replace him was rejected by the priest; Forrester wondered why he himself was being spared.

The hours dragged very heavily while Beresford was absent at his work. Forrester had nothing to do. He roamed about the cavern, talked a little to Wing Wu, looked in at Beresford occasionally; but during the greater part of the day he had only his thoughts to occupy him. But it happened one day, as he passed the spot where the spare bamboo poles were laid, that an idea flashed into his mind. It seemed fantastic, probably impracticable; but it might at least be attempted: anything was better than this stagnant life in death.

The success or failure of the scheme that had occurred to him depended on the accuracy of Beresford's theory that the dust formed by the action of the rays on the cavern roof protected the rock from further destruction. If this was correct, and the dust could be removed, exposing fresh surfaces, the piercing of the chimney could be accelerated far beyond its normal rate. With a sufficiently long pole the dust coating could be brought down during the intervals when the rays were shut off by the slab. Such a pole might be constructed from the bamboo rods.

A difficulty arose from the fact that the cavern was never dark. It was always pervaded by the dim green light emanating from the walls. But the rods were partially screened by the sentry-box, and Forrester thought that in the dead of night, when the priest was asleep, and the negritos more or less drowsy, he might succeed in purloining the bamboo, and carrying it into the passage beyond the inner cavern.

Without mentioning the matter to Beresford, he waited till all was quiet, then stole round the wall towards the rods, picked up as many as he could carry, and made his way undetected to the place determined on. Next night he removed a few more in the same way. Their disappearance had apparently not been noticed by the priest.

The following day was Beresford's turn of duty. In the early morning, after the new priest had arrived, Forrester told his companion what he had done.

"*Fiat experimentum!*" cried Beresford delightedly. "I will tell you the result to-night. But not a word to Wing Wu. One of these days Wen Shih may occupy the sentry-box, and the poor lad will blab everything."

As soon as he had completed the transmutation of the allotted number of plates, Beresford fitted two of the bamboo rods together telescopically, tied his coat by its sleeves to the end of the pole thus formed, and inserting this wad into the cavity, thoroughly scoured its roof. A considerable quantity of fine dust fell on to the slab and the floor around. He then raised the slab, allowing the rays to play on the roof for a longer time than when the leaden plates were sunk in the pit. This process he repeated again and again, heedless of his increasing weariness and a stupefying headache, until Forrester rushed in hurriedly to say that the priest, evidently surprised at his unusually prolonged absence, was coming towards the passage to seek its explanation. Beresford instantly untied his coat, donned it, while Forrester laid the pole in the recess; then, taking Forrester's arm, met the priest at the entrance, feigning a deeper exhaustion than he actually felt. The priests seldom entered the inner cavern; this man threw a casual glance around it, and followed the prisoners back to the outer cavern, suspecting nothing.

"It works!" Beresford whispered when he got to his customary place, and at once fell into a dead sleep.

Later on, he told Forrester that the experiment had succeeded beyond his hope.

"As nearly as I could measure with the pole," he said, "the cavity is lengthened by at least a foot. The rays act with tremendous rapidity. In a few days, unless we are much deeper than I think, we shall have cut a hole right through to the level of the Temple floor."

"But what then?" asked Forrester dejectedly. "I thought of it merely as giving us something to do--you are doing it all!--something that would buck you up if it proved your theory; but it will do us no good."

"It will at least scare the Old Man. If we are careful, he will never suspect that we have anything to do with it. He may even think the place no longer safe for his old carcase, and decamp."

"Leaving us to perish!"

"There's an old saw, 'Never go up to the chimney-pots to look for the rain.' We'll take things as they come. By the way, do you feel able to take a turn to-night, when all's quiet? The clink of the chain can't be heard here, and it will quicken the job."

"I'll try," said Forrester at once. "I've felt mean ever since they put you on and left me out."

"Thanks! One thing we must be very careful about: to brush away the dust to the sides of the cavern. We mustn't arouse suspicion. Will you do that before

you leave? Don't work for more than an hour or two, as nearly as you can guess, and come away at once if you feel faint. Lay the pole against the wall of the farther passage; the Chinamen never go there, and thank goodness the priests are shy of the place, small blame to them!"

The work thus begun was continued at every opportunity during the succeeding days and nights. The pole had to be lengthened by the addition of another rod: foot by foot the chimney was excavated, the width of it remaining uniform, corresponding to the shape of the hole in the floor.

Every night before they slept the Englishmen talked over the progress made during the day.

"If we only had a ladder!" said Beresford once. "I agree with you: the mere cutting of the chimney will be an empty triumph. We shouldn't be properly constituted men if we didn't wish to profit by our energies. Every man who isn't a mug, as soon as he has conquered one difficulty, burns to tackle another. I've puzzled and puzzled, but I see no way whatever of using the chimney as a channel of escape."

"Couldn't we make a ladder of bamboo?"

"Quite impossible! To begin with, there isn't enough of it; then, we have no tools. It is tantalising in the extreme."

"There's this to be said. Even if we did break through, it would only be to find ourselves in the midst of our enemies. It would mean the Eye for both of us."

"I have been wondering lately whether that wouldn't after all be better than to stay here much longer. Forrester, the Old Man has beaten me at last. If he sends for me again, I'm afraid I shall ignominiously cave in. It was one thing to pity those poor Chinamen when we had no real personal knowledge of what they were suffering. It is quite another to share it, to feel the steady sapping of one's vigour, the horrible blankness that comes over one's mind. I know for the first time in my life what it is to writhe in the clutches of Giant Despair."

In his many blank moments, Forrester reflected in utter desolation of spirit on their desperate case. Ill and miserable as he himself felt, he dwelt, not on his own condition, but on the appalling change that was creeping over the once buoyant-hearted companion of his imprisonment. The cheeriness was gone. It was an effort now to Beresford to talk. The sickly hue induced by the greenish light had become on his countenance a ghastly pallor. His limbs shook, his gait was slow and stumbling, his once upright frame was beginning to stoop like that of an old man. On his days off duty he lay like a log, sleeping, or simply existing in apathy and listlessness. Was he to drift thus on a slow tide towards death?

One night, Forrester was wearily laying the pole in its resting-place, when he heard a sudden click near by, such as might be caused by the fall of some hard substance on the floor. He looked down, but there was nothing on the smooth

rock to account for the sound. In a moment it was followed by a second click, apparently a little nearer, and from the direction of the cleft in the wall. His curiosity thoroughly aroused, Forrester stooped and glanced in. The light in the cleft was dim, but after peering for a few seconds, he caught sight of a small object at a distance of perhaps ten or twelve feet away. He had not noticed it when looking into the cleft before, but that might merely have been because he was not expecting to see anything, nor indeed making a keen examination. But it seemed that the object must have moved; otherwise the click was scarcely explicable; and Forrester was sufficiently interested to wish to get hold of it. It was far beyond reach; the cleft was too narrow to admit his head and shoulders; but he could edge one of the shorter bamboo rods sideways into the hole, and then worry the object forward until he could grasp it.

This was the work of less than a minute. To his intense mortification, the thing, when it came to hand, turned out to be nothing but a bone.

He was on the point of throwing it back, when the idea struck him that the discovery might give a momentary fillip to Beresford's flagging spirits. So he slipped the bone into his pocket, and returned to the outer cavern.

Next morning he accompanied Beresford, as he sometimes did, to the entrance of the transmuting chamber, and watched him commence his daily task. He had forgotten the incident of the night. But when the place was irradiated with the brilliant rays, he chanced to put his hand into his pocket, felt the bone, and drew it out, thinking now so little of it as to purpose casting it into the open pit. But as he turned it over in his hand, he caught sight of some thin white scratches upon it, at first sight irregular and fortuitous, but, at a second glance, forming, as it seemed to him, the initials of his name, R.F.

Puzzled, and a little excited, he looked at it more carefully. It was not an old bone; a fragment of tendon, still supple, adhered to it. Examining it end-wise, he saw that the interior was filled with a fine substance that might be desiccated marrow. He shook it; some of the powdery contents fell to the floor. He knocked it against his boot, and almost shouted with amazement: for at his feet lay a tiny spill of paper, apparently rice paper, very tightly wound.

[image]

He shook it: some of the powdery contents fell to the floor.

Hot now with excitement, he unrolled the paper with nervous fingers, and saw on it, in small characters written, as it seemed, with the fire-blackened end of

a sharp stick, the words, "Give me my bone."

CHAPTER XIV

HEAD COOK

Mackenzie and Jackson, it will be remembered, had been removed from the Temple before Forrester, at the close of the scene with the Old Man. They were taken back to their separate cells, and locked in for the rest of the day. Jackson's nerves were shaken all to pieces; Mackenzie, whose robuster physique was less affected, was in desperate anxiety as to Forrester's fate. He spent a wretched day, a still more wretched night. By turning his back on the monster he managed to fend off the worst effects of the baleful eye; but the consciousness that it was there behind him with its unwinking glare intensified his distress. When morning came, and he was escorted again to the foot of the rock stairway, he welcomed the respite afforded by the prospect of a day in the open air, and hoped against hope that the Old Man had relented, and would allow Forrester to join him.

Night brings counsel, and Mackenzie was a long-headed Scot. He had come to the decision that it would be sheer folly, after what had happened, to repeat his refusal to work on the plantations. The depressing influence of solitude and the mysterious light was no doubt relied on by the Old Man to bring his prisoners to a proper docility. Well, Mackenzie would assume that virtue, if he had it not, and he would advise his friends, if they came, to fall in with his own plan: to work with apparent resignation, though always alert to seize on any opportunity of escape that might offer itself.

When he was handed a spade, therefore, by the priest who appeared to act as taskmaster, he accepted it, and set to work on the plot of ground assigned to him. But he took care not to ply his implement too energetically, stopping every now and again to mop his brow with his sleeve and to heave the sigh appropriate to a forced labourer.

As the day wore on, and neither of his friends appeared, he feared the worst. Jackson's absence might easily be accounted for by a nervous breakdown natural to a man of his temperament; but Forrester would have come if he had been at liberty to do so, and it seemed only too likely that he had either been demolished by the Eye, or that he was still confined to his cell, or possibly condemned to some other punishment whose nature Mackenzie could not guess. At the close of the

day he sought to relieve his suspense by addressing a question to the priest, but received only a stony stare. He could not tell whether the man understood him or not.

Several days passed in the same dreary, hopeless fashion. Mackenzie kept away from the old zamindar, who, though his daughter had been restored to him, was visibly broken down by a haunting dread of calamities yet to come. He exchanged only a few words now and again with Sher Jang, fearing, in the one case as in the other, that closer intercourse with them might tend to their harm. But one morning he was as much delighted as surprised to see Jackson appear at the head of the stairway. He had been supported in the climb, practically pushed up, by one of the priests. The taming process was evidently regarded as successful. From that time the two friends remained constantly on the plateau, being given a small hut among the cluster nearest to the dwellings of the priests. It contained no furniture; their only bedding was a blanket apiece.

In the fresh air, and under the bracing influence of Mackenzie's companionship, Jackson, in some degree, recovered tone. The two friends worked side by side. No check was placed on their association; it was evidently assumed that they were resigned to their lot, or at any rate too much dominated by their fears to give trouble. After the first day together they never spoke of Forrester: in their hearts they believed that they would see him no more.

But they sometimes speculated on the fate of Hamid Gul. They had never seen him since they passed his unconscious body in the rift. It seemed monstrous that so humble a member of their party should have fallen a victim to the Old Man's malignity; yet they could only surmise that, whatever the reason might be, the man had been put out of the way.

It was therefore with a joyous surprise that they saw him one day staggering across a field under a load of vegetables. Mackenzie called to him, but Hamid, though he must have heard the cry, pursued his way without so much as a turn of the head.

"There's a reason for that," said Mackenzie. "Hamid is no fool."

Some hours later, when work had ceased, and all the slaves had returned to their huts, a dark form appeared in the open doorway of that which Mackenzie and Jackson shared.

"Where is Forrester sahib, please to say, sahibs?" came in a whisper from Hamid Gul.

"Come away in, man," cried Mackenzie, "--if it is safe."

"It is right as rain, sahib," replied the Bengali. "Chinky jossers believe me a one-eyed ass. But Forrester sahib?"

"We don't know: we fear he is dead."

Hamid's one eye and twisted features told rather of rage than of sorrow. He

poured forth a torrent of abuse in his own tongue, invoking the direst curses on the heads of the oppressors, and the uttermost defilement of their graves.

"Where have you been all this time? What have they done to you?" asked Mackenzie.

"I am head cook and bottle-washer, sahib--may the sons of pigs boil everlastingly in oil! Hiked into kitchen, there I was, I having sung my praises quite a lot. For sake of self and master, I pocketed feelings and dignity and concocted that pilaff of lamb Forrester sahib was such nuts on. A bald-headed chap kept eye on me, and made me gobble a bit; then carried dish away, and told me in due course it was well. When he was gone, pig of Chinky cook put his nose out of joint and was exceedingly rude, saying many things in barbarous lingo of libellous nature."

"But you don't understand Chinese!" Mackenzie interposed.

"Exactly, quite so, sahib; but he had a face! My sublime effort took the cake, sahibs. They offered me job on spot. Every day I made something fresh and bilious, and cook in office did not get look in. He lost his wool, sahibs, and one day set on me tooth and nails, and bald-head found us going at it hammer and tongs. Chinaman got bag, and I got crib."

Hamid went on to explain that the fly in his ointment was his employer's want of trust. His work was always done under the eyes of a priest, and he had to taste of every dish before it was removed. He was disgusted, too, because he received neither money nor thanks. He had never learnt who it was that consumed his viands; the dishes always came back empty, and his unknown master had evidently a keen tooth for dainty fare.

His quarters were a lean-to adjoining the kitchen. On the other side was the door through which the priest carried the dishes to and fro. Hamid had had the curiosity one day to follow the priest at a safe distance, but was brought up by a closed door. In the wall of the passage there was a grating which had given him the idea that his employer must be a man of great wealth, for the bars of it appeared to be of pure gold. Once, to avoid the trouble of carrying a pail of dirty water to the field on which it was usually poured, he had been on the point of emptying it through the grating; but the priest had come by at that moment, and had rebuked him with such violence, and used such alarming threats about the punishment of the Eye, that he had never ventured to save his labour again.

"Do you know anything about the punishment of the Eye?" Mackenzie asked.

"Devil a bit, sahib. My one optic is only feature I have to boast of, and it goes without saying that I cannot afford to lose it."

The Englishmen felt that Hamid had much to be thankful for. It was clear that he had no suspicion of the horrors of the place, and they saw no reason for enlightening him. The less his fear, the more useful he might be.

"Well, man, you had better not stop any longer," Mackenzie said. "And don't come here again: you may be spied on. But I wish you to keep your eyes open--your one is as good as two--and find out all you can. We are keen to get away; but we see no chance of it. Maybe you'll find out one of these days how they get down to the rift. Don't make any attempt to see us unless you have something important to communicate. We will always be on the look-out. You go into the fields sometimes. If we see you open and close your hand three times, we will know you have something to say, and we will find some way to hear you; but not here: it's maybe not safe."

"Better warn him against the Old Man," Jackson suggested.

"Ah, true! Your cooking, Hamid, is done for the master of the place, a very old Chinaman. You may never see him; if you do, watch him carefully, and above all, never cross him. Now go, and mind yourself."

In giving instructions to Hamid Gul, Mackenzie had no definite hope. The man, being practically confined to his kitchen when within doors, was not in a position to ascertain for himself the interior arrangements of the place; and his ignorance of any language but his own and English would prevent his understanding any conversation he might overhear among the Chinese. But he could be trusted to make the best use of such opportunities as might offer.

Thinking over the little information that Hamid had been able to give, Mackenzie was struck with a suspicion. The grating!--was it not likely that here, as in European castles, there were dungeons beneath the floor of the principal chambers? Might not Forrester be immured underground, in a cellar to which the grating gave access? He wished he had thought of this when Hamid was with them, and enquired about the nature of the grating, and the size of the opening it covered. Why had the priest objected to its use as a sink? Not from any tenderness towards prisoners, if prisoners there were. Either there must be, below, some treasure of the Old Man which water might injure, or--and here Mackenzie felt some excitement--it was desired that the existence of the aperture should not be known to the prisoners.

Impatient to question Hamid Gul, Mackenzie hoped every day to see him; but it was not until the third morning after his visit that the Bengali again appeared in the fields, with a basket slung on his back. He passed at some distance from the Englishmen, and they saw his left hand open and close three times. Looking around to make sure that no priest was on the watch, Mackenzie left his plot, struck off at an angle, and slipping round a plantation of tea shrubs, met Hamid in the enclosure where he was digging truffles.

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

"I have got a rise, sahib," the man replied. "Purely honorary; no pay!"

"What do you mean?"

[image]

Mackenzie met Hamid in the enclosure where he was digging truffles.

"Rich food sometimes is cause of colic and inward qualms, sahib. After tiffin yesterday, bald-head comes to me;--he has a face, sahib!--and says 'Hai! come along!' Off I trot, knees playing castanets, blue funk, because of his face. Along passage, into room, another room, much to flabbergastation of humble self; for what do I see but gold everywhere: table of gold, seats of gold, cups of gold!

"On couch of gold was very old man, very like monkey, bald as egg. Two bald-heads on knees to him: hai! what faces! Had to go down on knees; old man he stared at me with eyes like burning coals. I shivered like jelly. 'You poison me!' he said. I swore by Siva I was innocent as new-born babe. I talked a lot, told him I was absolutely ignorant he was so old, too old to eat things that would upset ostrich digestion of piggish little sons of English sahibs. I declared with great gusto if I had known I would not have made things so bilious. 'Send for doctor,' he said. Another bald-head came. Kicked me away, knelt in my place. I crawled away, pricked in manhood's dignity, but calm in innocency of heart, and while doctor did his job, I took squint round. Great snakes, sahib! At one end of room, in recess behind screen of gold wire, I spotted gorgeous robe hanging on gold peg, and on small gold table most splendiferous head-dress. My stars! old Chinky could give socks to American millionaire."

"Did you see the Eye?" Jackson asked eagerly.

"What eye, sahib? Old man's eyes enough for me. They lugged me back; down I drop again; his eyes made me frizzle. He said 'Go!' Nothing wrong with him but liver off colour. But this morning bald-head told me to carry in dish myself: in future I must taste all grub in presence of old man. That is my rise, sahib."

"Eh, man, you're lucky," said Mackenzie. "But now tell me: the grating in the passage--what is it like?"

"It is thin bars of gold, sahib."

"How far apart?"

"Width of two fingers, sahib."

"And how large is the hole?"

"As long as my outstretched arms, and a little wider than my spread fingers."

"Big enough to crawl through?"

"If you were flat as a flounder, sahib."

"Can you see to the bottom of the hole?"

"No, sahib: it is dark, and goes deep."

"Next time you come, bring me a small marrowbone, not wider than your two fingers. Fill it with dried marrow, closely pressed together. Can you get any paper?"

"There is rice paper in kitchen, sahib."

"Bring me a piece, and something I can write with--a blackened stick, or a bit of charcoal. You will remember?"

"Like a book, sahib."

Fingering his beard meditatively, he walked away.

"What do you mean to do?" Jackson asked, when Mackenzie had repeated what Hamid had told him, and the instructions he had given.

"Put a wee note inside the bone, and get Hamid to fling it down the grating."

"But if it falls into the wrong hands, and is taken to the Old Man? He speaks English: he may read it too."

"What I write will only puzzle him."

"In any case, what's the good? Suppose Dick is there. How can he send an answer?"

"I've my notion about that, Bob. All depends on Hamid; but, as I said, he is no fool; he will do what we tell him, and take every care. I wish it were to-morrow!"

"What puzzles me is the Eye. What on earth can it be?"

"That beats me. Clearly it is harmless at times; Hamid didn't notice it. I think it's a kind of box, containing some destructive substance in a concentrated form. The Old Man evidently has some device for opening it without harm to himself. One thing is very clear."

"What's that?"

"Och, man, that the old wretch must be very human after all, or he couldn't have the stomach ache."

CHAPTER XV

THE MOLES

"Give me my bone!"

Forrester puzzled over the words. They seemed merely absurd. What could their meaning be? It was a joy to know that Mackenzie or Jackson was above, and

had discovered the place of imprisonment; but they must know little about it, after all, or they would be aware that it was impossible to send them an answer. Yet they must expect an answer; they would not have sent a message, mysterious as it was, unless they looked for at least an acknowledgment that it had been received. It occurred to him that the cleft might be used as a speaking tube: but a moment's consideration told him that it would be unwise to put this to the test. His voice might be heard by an enemy!

Beresford was so much exhausted after the day's work that Forrester did not mention the strange discovery to him that night. But the next day was an off day for him, and in the afternoon, after he was somewhat restored by rest and food, Forrester showed him the bone and the paper. The effect was electric. A look of eager hope dawned in the tired eyes. A murmur of thankfulness broke from his lips, and he lay for a while thinking.

"We have nothing we can write with," he said at length.

"Nothing at all. My pockets are empty," replied Forrester.

"Not even a pin?"

"No. Wait, though!" He felt along the edge of his waistcoat. "Yes, by Jove! I've one solitary pin. They would naturally overlook that."

"Prick the words through the paper."

"But what words?"

"Something that won't give anything away if the paper falls into the wrong hands. 'Give me my bone!' Answer, 'Take it!' Put the paper in the bone, fill up with dust, and replace it in the cleft when you get a chance. Leave the rest to our friends above."

The guard kept by the priest and the negritos was little more than a form. The abject condition of the Chinese prisoners precluded any likelihood of revolt. Consequently no real watch was kept at night, and the only risk was that an unusual sound might awaken one of the three somnolent figures at the entrance. Forrester was careful to move very quietly when he returned to the cleft that night, though after all there was little chance of a slight sound from the inner cavern reaching the priest's ears.

On reaching the cleft he looked in eagerly for the string which he half expected to find there. He was not disappointed. A few feet from the opening, but within easy reach, lay another bone, with a string attached. He replaced this by the bone containing the paper, and stole back to his friend. The second bone held no message.

"We shall hear from them again to-morrow," said Beresford hopefully.

Next night, when Forrester visited the cleft, he found the bone on the end of the string, untied it, and hurried back with it to Beresford. Shaking out its contents, he found a somewhat larger screw of paper, enwrapping a sharpened

stick of charcoal. On it, when opened out, he read: "String 65': hole 3' x 10": grated: where are you? Reply at once. M."

"He evidently thinks communication safe at night," said Beresford. "We can't tell him everything. Just write: 'Cavern. Boring chimney through roof. More to-morrow.'"

Forrester wrote the message, adding 'B. is here,' replaced the paper, and returning to the cleft, tied the bone again to the string. It occurred to him to give a slight tug. The string gave slightly, then stretched taut. It was evidently fastened to something above.

It was long before the Englishmen fell asleep that night. They discussed in whispers the information they had gained, and their future course of action. They could not but conclude that the cleft, narrow as it was, was the avenue by which the negrito had escaped; but what was possible to his diminutive frame was impossible to them. The grating had probably been placed over the hole after his escape was discovered, to prevent a second attempt. It was clear that the cleft was not perpendicular, or the little man could hardly have climbed up it. If they could ascertain the angle of its slope, they might calculate the vertical distance, and learn how long their chimney through the roof of the inner cavern must be made. They had no means of discovering this fact, which would have been so useful to them; but it seemed probable that, allowing for the steepest practicable slope, the chimney must be pierced for at least forty feet before it reached the surface.

By gradually lengthening the bamboo pole, and clearing the dust from the sides of the chimney, they had already extended the range of the rays nearly twenty feet above the roof, and more than thirty feet above the floor of the cavern. They had now no more bamboo rods; the pole could not be lengthened further; it was impossible to remove the dust at a greater height without a ladder to stand on. But, with communications open, a ladder might no longer be an impossibility. With a knife and some stout string they might form one of bamboo, and still leave enough for a pole wherewith to continue their work of removing the dust. Forrester resolved to ask for these articles at the first opportunity.

Beresford pointed out the importance of letting Mackenzie know the spot at which the chimney, when completed, would reach the upper air. It might prove to be in the very quarters of the enemy. In that case the chances of escape would seem to be remote indeed. But Mackenzie was cautious as well as shrewd, and with this necessary information in his possession he would know how to direct his own course, and what advice to give his friends below.

Accordingly, next day Forrester carefully paced the distance between the cleft and the pit in the inner cavern. Allowing as accurately as he could for the windings of the passage, he gauged the length to be approximately fifty yards in

a straight line. At night, he found on opening the paper secreted in the bone that Mackenzie had anticipated him. "Cleft--?--> chimney." he read. He crossed out the query and wrote "50 yds.: cleft on right," adding: "Send knife + stout string." He returned to the cleft several times during the night in the hope of finding the things asked for; but it was not until the next night that they came: a large kitchen knife such as is used in boning meat, and about a dozen yards of thin hempen cord.

The work on the chimney had been perforce interrupted for several days, much to Beresford's benefit. The less prolonged exposure to the noxious atmosphere of the inner cave, and the new hope engendered in his heart by the knowledge that something was in progress above, effected a decided improvement in his physical and mental condition. His fear now was that he would be summoned again to the Old Man, and condemned without reprieve, before the chimney was complete. He resolved, if he were sent for, to persist in his refusal to translate the tablet, in the hope that the Old Man would spare him for yet further coercion.

Forrester set to work on the ladder as soon as possible after the knife came to hand. At night, in the passage, he cut short lengths of bamboo as rungs, and knotted them firmly to the two uprights with the cord. It was a crazy structure at the best, and he had a nervous dread lest, if he fell, he should break through or displace the slab over the pit, and be turned instantly to dust. But an experimental ascent against the wall and the cavern somewhat reassured him as to the ladder's stability, and setting its top in the cavity above the pit, he mounted and resumed the work of scouring away the dust overhead.

From that moment they applied themselves to the task with unremitting energy. As soon as their fellow prisoners were torpid in the heavy sleep that was the only alleviation of their lot, the Englishmen stole from their place, and laboured until their endurance gave out. Forrester spared Beresford as much as possible, and often undertook the double work, alternately lifting the slab to release the rays, and, when it was lowered, climbing to remove the dust. Each knew he carried his life in his hands, for the ladder could not be entirely hidden. If any priest should chance to visit by day the passage in which they laid it, he could not fail to observe it, and then their fate was sealed. But, judging by past experience, that risk was slight; and to disregard it was the only way to success.

Every now and then Forrester reported progress to his friends above. The length of the chimney increased about eighteen inches a day on the average; if, as they had calculated, there remained--before they constructed the ladder--twenty feet of rock to pierce, in a fortnight they should arrive at or very near the surface. Meanwhile they received no news of what was happening above ground. Mackenzie did not reveal his plans; perhaps, they thought, he had formed none, but was biding his time until the chimney was nearly completed. His messages were brief words of encouragement, assurances that all was well, and the news

that he was in touch daily with Jackson, Sher Jang, and Hamid Gul.

Rather more than a week after the first use of the ladder, Forrester made the alarming discovery that he could no longer reach the top of the cavity with the outstretched pole. This threatened the stoppage of the work, for neither pole nor ladder could be lengthened. He did not mention the matter to Beresford, who by this time had ceased to work on the chimney. When he had transmuted the due number of plates, he was too much fatigued to endure the strain any longer, and Forrester persuaded him that he must conserve his strength for what might ensue when the chimney was completely pierced. Anything that might throw him back was to be avoided.

Forrester puzzled over the baffling problem that now confronted him. Time and again he stood looking up into the cavity, trying to conceive of a means by which the top might be reached. It was two days before he hit upon a possible solution. If he could cut notches in the walls of the chimney, and insert in them cross-bars of bamboo, he would be able to raise himself successively to heights from which the rock above would be within reach of the pole. To obtain material for the cross-bars he would have to shorten the pole; the difficulty was the notches: how could they be cut with no tool but a knife? Standing on the ladder, he tried the point of the blade on the rock, and found that this, while not very hard, was not friable enough to be excavated by so pliant a tool.

His thoughts turned at once to Mackenzie: perhaps he could find a more serviceable instrument. That night he placed in the bone the following note: "Work stopped: send a chisel." Next night he found in the bottom of the cleft, not a chisel, but a bar of iron slightly pointed at one end. Accompanying it was a note: "Hope this will serve. Let me know when near surface."

This implement he found to answer his purpose sufficiently well. From his perch on the top rung of the ladder he worked out two holes in the rock on opposite sides of the chimney; then with the knife he cut the proper length of bamboo, and thus fashioned a cross-bar on which he could stand to repeat the same operation higher up. In this way he made a series of steps enabling him to brush the dust, as before, from the top of the cavity after each employment of the rays. Only then did he acquaint Beresford with the difficulty and the manner in which it had been overcome.

The progress of the work was necessarily slower now. The cross-bars had to be removed after each ascent; otherwise at the next opening of the pit they would have been instantly destroyed. But the piercing went on steadily, and Forrester felt sure that, unless his calculations were very much out, his pole would in a few more days penetrate the roof of the chimney, and emerge through a hole in the floor of whatever room was immediately above him.

"Be very cautious," Beresford urged, when he learnt this good news. "To

break through prematurely might be fatal to us all. Tell Mackenzie how things are, and ask for instructions."

"Yes. We shall have done our part. The rest will lie with him. I wonder what old Mac has been doing all this time?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOLE IN THE WALL

Mackenzie, meanwhile, had been playing a very busy and at the same time a very discreet part above ground, with timorous but efficient assistance from Hamid Gul. It was the latter who, at night, when all was quiet, stole from the kitchen into the passage, and tied the string to a bar of the golden grating, so cleverly that only the closest scrutiny could have detected it. Having ascertained by means of this device the whereabouts of Forrester, and the burrowing in which he and Beresford were engaged, Mackenzie, in his calm sagacious way, set himself to think out a plan for turning that work to account.

At first he decided to employ Hamid Gul only as postman. It was of vital importance that the Old Man should entertain no suspicion of his cook. There seemed little risk of Hamid's night-work at the grating being detected. An Indian servant moves more silently than a cat. On the other hand, if he pried and prowled in the pagoda or its precincts, for the purpose of discovering the means of access to the rift, or the other particulars about which Mackenzie was curious, he would almost certainly attract the notice of the Chinese, and ruin everything. For the same reason Mackenzie took care that his necessary meetings with Hamid should take place at different times of the day, at different spots, and in the utmost secrecy.

His own actions were dictated by shrewd policy. To begin with, he told Jackson no more, not that he distrusted him, but that he feared the possibility of his disclosing something if for any reason the priests should again practise their hypnotic powers on him. Then, he assumed in public the mien of a slave, utterly cowed, bereft of will power, who lived only to get through his appointed task, and had no other aim than to merit his masters' approval. So well did he act his part that after a few days' observation, the priests concluded that their taming process had been thoroughly effective, and paid no more attention to him than to any other of the men who toiled and sighed on the plateau. That the dejection which Mackenzie feigned was in Jackson's case real confirmed them in their delusion.

Sher Jang, meanwhile, went about his tasks with philosophic submissiveness; but in his heart of hearts he believed that the sahibs, whose movements he watched unobtrusively, would some day get the better of the Chinese dogs, and he was ready instantly to obey the call which he felt would surely come.

When Mackenzie was satisfied that he was accounted well broken in, he took to roaming at night about the precincts of the pagoda. He had already settled in his mind that the way to the rift could lie only through the pagoda or one of the neighbouring buildings, and his chief aim must be to discover that. It was also of vital importance to find as nearly as possible the spot where the chimney would cut through the earth; one step towards that discovery was the knowledge that its base was fifty yards from the cleft, and therefore presumably from the grating in the passage. He had been much puzzled by the almost incessant knocking that proceeded in day-time from the low building behind the orchard, but dismissed that matter as of no account so far as he and his friends were concerned.

The wall enclosing the pagoda and its appurtenances was twelve feet in height: too high to look over, too smooth to scale. The gate by which Hamid issued to the fields was unlocked for him by a priest, and locked after him. Mackenzie meant to get inside the wall. It would not be difficult, perhaps, to make a ladder, but before taking this in hand he might as well see if there was a less ostentatious mode of entry.

Strolling at the rear of the orchard late one dark night, he was guided by the sound of running water to the stream which he and Forrester had observed on their first day upon the plateau. He followed the course of this, and discovered that it entered the enclosure on the north side by a culvert beneath the wall. The darkness rendered it impossible to measure with the eye the width and depth of the arch, but on stooping and feeling along the stonework, he found that the stream poured through an iron grating. Since the water was perfectly clear, the grating must have been designed, not as a strainer, but as a defence against intrusion. The Old Man was obviously a stickler for privacy.

Mackenzie pushed and shook the grating, to ascertain whether it was firmly fixed. It held fast, but slipping his hand under the water, he discovered that the submerged part was worn thin with long corrosion, and that there were several gaps in it where the iron had been completely rusted away. With a little exertion he managed to break off a considerable portion of the grating below water, leaving a space large enough for a man to crawl through. It had occurred to him at once that this was a safer means of getting inside than by a ladder, which would always make him a conspicuous object to anyone who chanced to be looking that way from the buildings.

There was no time like the present. Without removing his clothes, Mackenzie slipped into the stream, spread himself flat, and, taking a long breath, wriggled

under water through the arch. When he stood up, he found that the top of the grating was considerably higher than his head, but that his head was higher than the earthen embankments of the stream on either side. The depth of the water was no more than three feet; but the embankments were no doubt intended to protect the buildings from flood in those seasons when the stream, swollen by the melting snow on the mountains, became a torrent.

Standing in the running water, he peered over the embankment on his right. The pagoda loomed up black against the sky some distance away. Between it and him were much lower buildings. No light was to be seen. All was quiet. He would have liked to push his exploration further, but felt that in his ignorance of the place the risk of mistake and detection was too great. Hamid's co-operation would be necessary if he was to profit by his secret entrance, and he resolved to come to an arrangement with the cook for the following night.

Returning to his hut by the same route, he stripped off his drenched clothes, spread them on the ground at the back, out of sight, to dry, rolled himself in his blanket, and was soon asleep.

"How far are your quarters from the wall?" he asked Hamid next day, meeting him among the raspberry canes.

"Thirty good paces, sahib," replied the man.

"I wish you to meet me to-night at the wall, where the stream flows under. Have you a clock?"

"An hour-glass, sahib."

"Then let the time be two hours after lock-up. And bring a blanket with you."

"I am your servant, sahib, but if I may humbly ask----"

"Ask nothing. You can get out quietly?"

"Truly, sahib, but if bald-head nabbed me----"

"Hech! Are you afraid? Have you ever seen any of them about after nightfall?"

"Answer to both questions in negative, sahib."

"Where do they sleep?"

"Other side of Old Man's house, sahib; also across garden on left."

"Very well then. You can slip out of your quarters at any time--that's so?"

"Quite O.K., sahib."

"Very well. Be at yon arch two hours after lock-up, with a dark blanket, you mind."

"I am your servant, sahib."

But Hamid asked himself with much trouble of mind what notion the Mac Sahib had in his noddle.

Jackson's curiosity had been awakened by Mackenzie's prolonged absence

on the previous night.

"Where are you off to, Mac?" he asked, seeing his companion prepare to go out again into the dark.

"I'll bide a wee before I answer you, Bob. You can't help, and if I come a mucker the less you know about it the better."

On reaching the culvert, he stripped off all his clothes and laid them beneath a bush. Too many wettings would so alter their appearance, he thought, as to draw the attention of the priests. Naked he slipped into the water, crawled through the arch, and on lifting himself slightly, saw Hamid crouching beneath the shelter of the embankment. He quitted the stream, flung about him the dark-blue blanket which the Bengali had brought, and putting his fingers to his lips, motioned to Hamid to lead him along the watercourse.

[image]

On lifting himself, he saw Hamid crouching beneath the shelter of the embankment.

Hamid was shivering with amazement and nervousness, but he obeyed in utter silence. They waded slowly through the stream, whose gurgling drowned the sound of their own movements. Presently they ducked to avoid a low bridge that led from one part of the grounds to the other. The dull thud of footsteps brought them to a sudden halt, and they crouched under the bridge, listening anxiously as the walker passed over their heads. They caught a glimmer of light, and as the footsteps receded, Mackenzie peeped out, and saw a priest, swinging a small lantern, moving towards a building a good distance on their left. He entered it, and disappeared.

"Last man out!" whispered Hamid.

After waiting a few minutes, they continued their way along the stream. It flowed through a wide inner enclosure, in which were scattered a number of small structures like summer-houses. Two slight bridges spanned the stream, and here and there were irregular masses which in the darkness could not be clearly distinguished, but which appeared to be rockeries. Quaintly shaped bushes outlined their dark forms against the walls of the distant buildings. Mackenzie concluded that this was either the Old Man's private garden, or the garden of the priests. Hamid could not tell him; he had been strictly forbidden to stray in this direction, or even to look over the low wall that surrounded the enclosure.

The watercourse was not straight. It turned now to the right, now to the left; its general course carried it obliquely across the garden, towards the angle of the wall. Thus the buildings on the right were not parallel with it. Mackenzie stopped,

to take his bearings. Hamid pointed out his own quarters, the kitchen adjoining, and the wall of the passage connecting with the dwelling of the Old Man. The pagoda reared itself high above the other buildings. Beyond it lay the barrack-like lodgings of the first order of priests; those of the second order were on the opposite side of the enclosure, and were approached by means of the bridges.

"How far along the passage is the grating?" Mackenzie asked in a whisper.

"About half-way, sahib."

"And on which side?"

"Side nearest us, to be sure, sahib."

"Wait here for me, and hold this."

He placed in Hamid's hands the end of a coil of string, climbed over the embankment, and made his way with stealthy speed towards the middle point of the passage wall, as nearly as he could judge it, paying out the string as he went. On reaching the wall, he turned swiftly back, coiling the string round his finger. When he regained Hamid's side, he knew that the distance between the wall and this point of the embankment was a little more than sixty yards. The chimney which his friends were cutting would reach the surface somewhere on the circumference of a circle of which the middle of the wall was the centre, and which would come within about ten yards of his present position. He followed that imaginary line with his eye. It passed close to one of the summer-houses, ran across a bed of plants, then over the grass on which he had walked, touched the embankment some yards to the right, owing to the oblique course of this, and finally reached a point near the door of the cook's lean-to. To gauge the position of the chimney more precisely was impossible, because, though he knew that it was on the near side of the passage, he knew no more than that it was fifty yards from the grating.

Making a mental note of the course of the circumference on which lay the locus of the hole sometime to be pierced, he considered for a few moments whether to steal towards the door of the pagoda, and try to discover whether it was guarded. But by this time he was shivering with cold. His reconnaissance had not been unfruitful, and he decided to return at once to his hut. He parted from Hamid at the culvert, handed him the blanket, again entered his cold bath, and picking up his clothes, ran lightly over the ground to his lodging. Only on those two night expeditions had he taken off his clothes since his departure from the village in the forest.

Next morning Hamid handed him a note which he had drawn up in the bone. It was the longest he had yet received: Forrester had grown bolder, more reckless, perhaps, with the lapse of time. It read: "Always light below. Can't tell when it becomes dark outside. Give us a sign."

"Things are moving," he thought. "They are afraid of cutting through in the

daylight. How in the world can I give them a sign? Hamid lets down the bone at all hours. Ah, well, I must think it out."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CARNIVORE

As Forrester mounted higher into the chimney, he worked with ever increasing caution. To allow the rays to break a passage through before everything was ready for joint action with his friends above would be disastrous. Another possible mischance was even more alarming. The ground might cave in prematurely by its own weight, or the weight of somebody passing over it. The result might be to hurl him on to the frail screen below, and through it into the pit.

To guard against such accidents he listened intently at each ascent, before he brushed away the protective dust. Once he thought he heard distant footfalls; another time the sound of running water. He wished that Mackenzie had been more communicative about what he was doing, and what he had discovered; but reflected that if his friend was silent, it was because, with Scotch canniness, he was determined to risk as little as possible, for the sake of all.

He waited patiently for the sign by which he would know when darkness fell in the open. The bone, no doubt, could be dropped only at uncertain intervals, as opportunity offered. Even if he knew that it would be let down precisely at the hour of sunset, he could not be sure of being then on the watch at the cleft, for it was not his duty to enter the inner cavern at all; his secret work there had been done only when guards and prisoners were asleep, and that was probably much later than sunset.

One day, Beresford, just before he had finished his task at the pit, and while Forrester was awaiting him in the outer cavern, noticed a trickle of water running from the inner passage towards him. While he was still looking at it in surprise, wondering where it came from, it was reinforced by a sudden swell, which carried the tiny stream across the floor of the cavern in a direct course for the open pit. By the time it reached the brink it had almost exhausted its energy; but some of it flowed slowly on, and poured over. Instantly there was a terrific explosion, like the bursting of an immense inflated bag, accompanied by a flash of white light which for the moment wholly conquered the green. Beresford was hurled against the wall of the cavern, and when he picked himself up, he saw that the force of

the concussion had shut the screen down upon the pit, gripping the gold chain to which was suspended the plate in process of transmutation.

It was all over in a moment; but Beresford had hardly recovered his senses when Forrester came hurrying into the cavern, through the cloud of dust which had followed the explosion, with Wing Wu and the priest in charge hard on his heels.

Forrester had just time to give a word of warning. When the priest arrived, Beresford had sufficient presence of mind to explain in Chinese that while the cover was lifted from the mouth of the pit there had been a loud bang. He did not mention the stream of water; it had now ceased to flow, and though its appearance had amazed him, and in his half-dazed condition he attached no definite meaning to it, he felt instinctively that it had a meaning for himself and his fellow prisoners.

The priest looked puzzled. The dust had set him coughing. He peered through it round the walls, remaining at a discreet distance from the pit, and thus failing to notice the dwindling trickle on the farther side. The atmosphere of the cavern, at all times unpleasant and oppressive, was stifling now. In a few moments everybody was retreating along the passage to the outer cavern, Beresford remaining only to release the chain, draw up the plate, and lower the apparently uninjured screen firmly into its place. The negritos were just bringing in the evening meal.

"Are you hurt?" Forrester asked anxiously.

"Slightly bruised, perhaps; nothing serious."

"What on earth caused the explosion?"

"A trickle of water into the pit. Where it came from----"

"That was the sign!" exclaimed Forrester aloud, knowing that the priest could not understand him. But Wing Wu understood.

"What sign, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Shall we tell him?" said Beresford.

Forrester hesitated for a moment.

"Not yet," he answered.

Wing Wu sighed, and turned away.

The priest at the entrance was joined by a second, drawn by the noise from the guard-room beyond the lake. They talked together for a few minutes, then the second man departed.

"He will tell the Old Man, no doubt," said Forrester to his companion.

"Yes; things are coming to a crisis. The water was our sign, no doubt. It could hardly have been accidental. Mackenzie must have thrown a bucketful or two through the grating. It is dark outside at about the time of our last meal."

"Do you think the priests suspect us?"

"Who can say what goes on in their Chinese minds? The fellow didn't see

the water: that is pretty certain. But I am troubled. In the chimney you heard running water above you, you said?"

"I am almost sure of it--perhaps the stream that runs across the plateau."

"If our chimney pierces its bed, we are doomed. There is not the ghost of a chance for us. The explosion you heard will be as a popgun to a whole Dreadnought armament in comparison with the result if the cavern is flooded. I take it that the water which fell into the pit was instantly decomposed by the rays. Only a little trickled over the brink; yet the explosion was powerful enough to hurl me against the wall. If water pours down in any volume, the whole place will be shattered, and we shall be cremated instantly in one enormous flame."

"Will you go up the chimney yourself presently, and see if I was right?" asked Forrester, aghast at the thought of this cataclysm.

"I will try. Thanks to you I am not nearly so much crocked as I was a few days ago. But we will wait a little longer than usual, to give the priest time to settle down if he is at all suspicious.... You were quite right, by the way, not to let me explain things to Wing Wu. He is so easily hypnotised that he might betray us at the first question. It will be time enough to tell him when our work is done."

Several hours later, they stole into the inner cavern, and when Forrester had placed the cross-bars in position, Beresford mounted the ladder, and climbed laboriously into the chimney from bar to bar. He carried the piece of pointed iron, with which he carefully probed the roof. Withdrawing the implement, he passed his fingers along it from the pointed end downwards.

"We are very near the surface," he called down softly. "You have destroyed all the rock. The iron has gone through two or three inches of clay, and then into loose earth. We can't risk employing the rays again. If the earth above collapsed en masse, it would smash through the screen and carry us with it into the pit. We must bore a hole gradually with the iron."

"What about the water?" Forrester asked.

Beresford listened intently, Forrester standing below with his hand on the ladder.

"Yes," said Beresford at length, "you are right. But it appears to be at one side, not directly overhead. Ah! there are footsteps. Listen!"

They kept absolute silence. The dull thud of footsteps overhead was clearly audible. Forrester looked up at his friend, dimly visible high above him. His attention was so fully concentrated that a slight sound behind caused him to jump round with a sudden start. And there, in the entrance to the cavern, he saw the priest, peering up towards the hole in which the ladder rested.

In after years Forrester often felt a quickening of the pulse as he tried to piece together the confused sequence of events in the next crowded minute. Whether he shouted to warn his companion before the Chinaman swung round and dashed

[image]

There he saw the priest, peering up towards the hole in which the ladder rested.

back along the passage, or whether the Chinaman fled first and his cry followed, he could never distinctly recollect. All that he could remember was that, impelled by an instinctive feeling that the priest must be caught and silenced, he sprang like a tiger towards the intruder. Probably the fact was that the priest, being on the alert, had already turned before Forrester dashed after him, for he had a lead of several yards up the narrow passage.

Forrester was the younger and the fleeter of the two. Weeks of life in the mephitic atmosphere of the underworld, indeed, had slackened his muscles and lowered his nervous energy; his wind came short; but at this perilous crisis he seemed to regain all the athletic vigour which had served him so well on the football field in years gone by. When the priest dashed into the outer cavern, Forrester was only a few yards in the rear.

The former, feeling no doubt that he had now desperate men to deal with, rushed straight across to the entrance, where he might expect to find the negrito guards ready to support him. The little men, however, startled out of their wits by a sight which never, in all their years of servitude, had they beheld before, stood like stockfish, gazing amazedly at the two figures swiftly approaching them. When he reached them, the Chinaman appeared to realise instantly that he could place no reliance on men so palsied. He darted between them, turned to the right, and ran as fast as his long robe would allow along the ledge leading to the ward-room on the other side of the lake.

Crossing the cavern Forrester had gained on him. At the entrance he was barely two yards behind. He flashed past the astounded negritos, swung round on to the ledge, came up with his quarry just as he reached the plank bridge, and making a spring forward, caught him round the waist, as he had tackled many a man in pursuit of the oval ball. The Chinaman, however, although less agile, was of heavier build, and by sheer strength and weight he began to haul Forrester along the bridge towards the further ledge, at the end of which his colleague and the negrito guards were already massing.

Forrester clung to him desperately, tried to drag upon him by digging ineffectual heels into the plank; but with the cavern wall on his right, and only two feet of planking to manoeuvre on, he found that inch by inch he was being pulled into the jaws of danger. The Chinaman was clutching at the crazy handrail for purchase in hauling his tenacious grappler along. In a few seconds Forrester must

either release him, or fall a captive into remorseless hands. Despair struck a spark in his darkening mind. There was one chance--one, and no more!

Bracing his right leg, he threw the whole weight of the Chinaman and himself against the balustrade. It creaked; there was the snap of breaking timber. Forrester released his man and drew quickly back. The priest fell with a great splash into the green oily waters of the lake.

By this time the startled company at the remote end of the ledge were beginning to advance. A spear whizzed past Forrester's ear. To protect himself, he wrenched away a piece of the broken handrail. With this club he could ward off a missile or crack a skull. Facing the enemy, he retreated with wary footsteps along the bridge. The priest, leading on his negritos, came striding along the ledge, his parchmenty features grimacing with rage.

Forrester was trembling in every limb. The sudden spurt, the muscular strain, had told heavily upon his debilitated body. And again despair seized upon his soul as he realised that his efforts after all had been made in vain. Before long the priest now menacing him would hurry to acquaint the Old Man with this revolt of the prisoners. They would be taken aloft, and then--the Eye!

But all speculation was suddenly shocked out of his mind by a tragic sequel, unlooked-for, terrible.

The Chinaman was still floundering beneath the bridge.

Swift and silent, from out the sombre spaces of the lake there slid a something huge and hideous--a Shape. A glint of greenish light in cruel eyes; a flash of gleaming teeth in jaws like those of a mammoth dog-fish; a shriek of terror and despair; then silence, and a slow heaving of the waters. The Monster had claimed his ancient right!

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER THE STARS

Forrester and his enemies alike were for the moment paralysed by the horror of the tragic scene. Before they had recovered their wits, Beresford dashed up behind his friend, and cried to him to tear up the plank. Only one who had not seen the actual occurrence could have intervened at such a moment.

"Quick, man!" cried Beresford, amazed at the other's sluggishness.

Pulling himself together, Forrester stooped and helped Beresford to haul the

plank to their own side of the ledge, leaving an impassable gap between them and their enemies. Only by swimming could they now be reached, and Forrester felt, with a return of his nausea, that the priest, after the object lesson he had just had, would recoil from so terrible a risk.

"Bring the plank back into the cavern," said Beresford. "There's no time to lose."

They hurried back. On hearing Forrester's shout, Beresford had descended the shaft with reckless speed, and hurried through the passage after him. When he gained the cavern pursuer and pursued had disappeared through the entrance. Dashing after them, he levelled the two negritos, now at last awaking from their torpor, with blows left and right. He said afterwards that it was monstrously unfair--like hitting children. Too late to witness the fate of the priest, he perceived what had escaped Forrester's over-wrought mind--that only the destruction of the bridge could save them from the Old Man's immediate vengeance. Whether it would result in their complete and final salvation was on the knees of the gods.

Returning to the cavern, they caught up the spears of the negritos, and carried them and the plank to their customary quarters at the further end. Of the Chinese prisoners, only Wing Wu and his cousin had enough spirit left to interest themselves in the extraordinary incidents of the past few minutes: the others had scarcely stirred in their sleep.

"Lie down, my lad," said Beresford kindly, as Wing Wu came to meet him, his eyes gleaming with a light not seen in them for many a day. "You will want all your strength. You shall know all about it, presently."

As he spoke, he reeled against Forrester, who caught him in his arms and lowered him gently to the floor.

"Decidedly groggy," he murmured with a haggard smile. "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance to you, old man. Give me a minute or two: then--by George! I shall talk!"

He closed his eyes, and lay for a while silent on his back, his panting nostrils telling how great had been the tax upon his weakened frame. By and by he looked up at Forrester, reclining near him.

"Thank Heaven, my brain is clear!" he began. "What an absurd thing one's body is! ... Now, they'll either rebuild the bridge and storm us, or do nothing, and starve us out. It depends on whether the Old Man can bear the thought of extinguishing us without using the Eye! Either way, we are doomed--unless we get out. That's as much as to say that we must get out at once. We must! And we must let our friends above know when to expect us Scribble a note to Mackenzie, then: we pop out of the chimney to-morrow night."

"Is it possible?" Forrester asked.

"You will manage it. If I am not mistaken, a few hours' work with the iron

will pierce through to the surface. Only take the greatest care."

"And what then?"

"There you have me! I haven't an idea. But I am inclined to think that your canny, close Scot is ready for us, has his plan of campaign thoroughly mapped out. I trust him the more because he has told us nothing. Well, you mount first--I'm afraid that's inevitable----"

"Of course----"

"I follow when you give the word, and I think our two young Chinese friends here will be men enough to join us. We make four: Mackenzie will have Jackson and your shikari, I suppose; your cook is useless as a fighting man?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. He is rather a timorous creature."

"And my plucky little Tibetan--I'd be glad to think he might make one of us. But this is all guess-work: we can only be sure of six or seven. Obviously six or seven can't tackle two or three hundred well-fed Chinamen and some scores of negritos. Mackenzie has perhaps discovered the way down into the rift, and means us to slip off in the dark. Guess-work again! Let us leave all that. Take a good sleep; then tighten your belt, and ply that bit of iron to bore our passage. Please the Powers, we'll worm our way into God's air before twenty-four hours are up."

With no means of telling the time, Forrester slept brokenly, and was at work long before day had dawned above. To guard against danger from the falling earth, he got Wing Wu to demolish the sentry-box, and lay the material in gridiron pattern across the covering of the pit. Then, mounting into the chimney, he prised out the clay bit by bit, and afterwards the crumbling earth above it, cutting the hole to the shape of a narrow cone.

As the work progressed, the sound of running water grew more and more distinct. Forrester knew that if the bed of the stream were pierced, there would be a swift end to their tribulations. He could only hope for the best, and persevere. How long he worked he never knew; so much engrossed was he that he did not remember he had had no food. There was no sign of interruption. Beresford remained on guard in the outer cavern, listening for the footsteps of the Old Man's minions, the ministers of the Law of the Eye. But not a sound was heard from the direction of the lake. It seemed that the Old Man was content to bide his time.

It was a blissful moment when Forrester, thrusting the iron upwards into the earth, felt suddenly that there was no resistance. When he withdrew it, a thin slit of white light appeared at the apex of the cone. He had pierced the surface, and a great joy thrilled him, for he knew that he had not touched the stream. But he was instantly aware of a double danger. The hole, small as it was, might be seen. Even if it were not seen, a chance passer-by might tread upon it and break through. Would Fortune, he wondered, stand their friend? Nothing more, at any

rate, could be risked while daylight lasted.

He descended, and hurried to give Beresford the great news. Beresford pressed his hand.

"To-night!" he said. "Now for these lads here."

Quietly, as though telling a tale, he informed the two young Chinamen of the bare fact that a way had been opened for them to the upper world.

"Will you join us?" he asked. "There are friends above. What may lie before us we cannot tell: we may have to fight for our lives. Will you take the risks?"

Wing Wu assented eagerly; free from the domination of the priests he was a different being. His cousin was less ready; on being shown the ladder, and the cross-bars rising one above another until they almost disappeared, he shook his head, declaring that he had no strength for the feat demanded. The others forbore to urge him.

"He will try when he sees the rest of us go up," Beresford remarked confidently. "Our plan is fixed? You mount first; at your signal we follow. You and I will take the negritos' spears. The only other weapons are the iron bar and the knife. Wing Wu can take the bar; the other man the knife. We wait only for darkness."

The period of waiting was trying to them all. Time after time Forrester went into the inner cavern, and peered up the perpendicular tunnel at the tiny streak of light. The elder Chinamen, dull-eyed and listless, merely wailed for food. The two negritos paced restlessly about the larger cavern, looking again and again through the entrance towards the farther end of the ledge, now silent and deserted. More than once Forrester went to the cleft to see whether his last message had been drawn up; but the bone remained where he had laid it. This added tenfold to their anxiety, for without the co-operation of their friends they would be like men lost in a wilderness. The chimney, indeed, penetrated to the open air, not to a roofed chamber; but at what spot, whether in an unenclosed field, or in a walled garden or courtyard, they had no means of telling. Without a guide, they might as well be in Minos' labyrinth. One consideration, however, prevailed over all others: to remain below was to starve; above ground, they could at least die fighting.

At last it seemed to Forrester that the streak above was becoming fainter. He stared upwards, until convinced beyond doubt that the shades of evening were falling. Quickly the light faded. All was dark.

He rushed to the cavern to tell Beresford, then hurried back, mounted the scaffolding, and with his spear slightly enlarged the hole at the top. The gurgle of water struck more loudly upon his ear. A footfall startled him, and he held his hand in sickening dread that the fatal discovery was made. The sound passed and died away, but the scare made him defer further work until later, when he might suppose the enemy were sound asleep.

When every minute seemed an hour, it was impossible to gauge the flight of time. But, all allowances being made for their impatience, Beresford judged that three or four hours had passed before he suggested that it was now safe to resume operations. Once more Forrester scraped away at the hole. The glimmer of stars lent him encouragement and hope. Inch by inch the earth fell away; he pushed his hand through; at last, in quivering suspense, his head. He drew in great gulps of the sweet air, that was like champagne to him after the noisome atmosphere below. And with eager eyes, little above the level of the ground, he looked about him.

It was very dark; only a faint shine from the stars thinned the blackness. Almost at once he became aware that while the view before him was unobstructed, it was shut out behind by a mound of earth. From beyond this he heard the slow wash of the stream, and he gasped with thankfulness that the iron had escaped the channel, apparently by inches.

Nothing was in sight but the dark shapes of bushes, arbours, and the pile of buildings beyond. He was holding himself rigid, listening for sounds, wondering what he must do, when a slight, slow hiss struck upon his ear. Was it merely the rustle of the breeze? It came again. His message had not been received; no friend, it seemed, could be awaiting him; if the sound were human, could it proceed from anyone but an enemy?

He waited, tense, watchful, scarcely breathing. Then he started, for a few yards away, at the base of the embankment, a dark shape was stirring. Instinctively he tightened his clutch upon the spear, though he knew that with only his head above ground he could do nothing to defend himself. His one precaution was to sink down until only his eyes and scalp were above the surface.

He could not yet distinguish whether the form was that of an animal or of a man. It lifted itself, became gradually erect, and moved very slowly, almost imperceptibly, towards him. Then he began to recognise something familiar and friendly in the shape; he raised his head a little; a rush of hot blood made him dizzy; and he almost swooned with unspeakable joy and thankfulness when he heard a whisper in old Mac's well-known voice.

[image]

A rush of hot blood made him dizzy, and he almost swooned when he heard a whisper in old Mac's well-known voice.

"Dick!"

"Be careful!" Forrester murmured anxiously. "Don't come too near. Your

weight may break through."

"Now, quick! How many do you muster?"

"Beresford and two Chinamen. There are others--helpless."

"So! Bring up the able-bodied, and make for yon summer-house; you see!--a yard or two away. Wait for me there."

Mackenzie crept silently away: he never wasted words. Not till afterwards did Forrester learn how the patient Scotsman had prowled about the grounds nightly in order to guard against the contingency that had actually happened--the sudden appearance of the prisoners above ground. Hamid Gul had accidentally dropped the string down the grating when trying to tie it to a bar, and having no more to spare, could neither send nor receive a message.

Forrester withdrew his head, and set to work to enlarge the hole for the passage of his shoulders. It was an unexpectedly slow process. He dared not hack vigorously for fear of bringing a mass of earth tumbling in upon him, or of piercing the embankment and letting down a deluge. But he picked away patiently until the gap was large enough to scramble through.

Then he gave the long-awaited word, and heaved himself to the surface. In spite of his care, a chunk of earth broke from the edge and fell down the chimney, breaking and scattering on the bamboos laid across the slab. Beresford waited a moment or two; then he mounted, without accident, and after him Wing Wu. The three men crouched near the hole, waiting for Chung Tong to appear. It seemed that he would never come. Time was flying; the dawn could not be far off. Presently they heard an ascending scale of sighs as the Chinaman, pricked by fear of loneliness to follow them, climbed the bars one by one, each upward move accompanied with a sigh. When his head emerged, Forrester and Beresford caught his shoulders, and heaved him through, not without disturbing clods that fell with ominous thuds, just audible, on the screen.

Forrester lead the way stealthily to the summer-house indicated by Mackenzie. There Mackenzie and Jackson, with Hamid Gul, were awaiting them. For a few moments speechless greetings passed between the reunited friends; their hearts were full; feeling was too intense to find expression in word. When Mackenzie at last spoke, there was an unusual huskiness in his tones.

"Come now, listen, all of you. We are in a garden; there's a seven-foot wall around it. Beyond the wall is a larger enclosure. That's where the buildings are. Dick, you and I are going through Hamid's quarters and the kitchen into the pagoda. We are going to collar the Eye!"

A thrill shook them all.

"Hamid knows where it is. If we canna do it, we capture the Old Man, and hold him as a hostage. There's a sentry in the antechamber leading to his apartments. There's another at the principal outer door, which opens to the enclosure

yonder. They're likely fast asleep. We'll no meddle with the man at the principal door. The other--we'll have to deal with him. If there's an alarm, the rest of ye just bolt for yon door, and do your best to hold it against the priests. If the sentry has gone inside, one or two of ye follow him up. You've got arms of a sort: you can change 'em for the two-three things we've brought if you like 'em better. It's touch and go, ye ken. We must be swift and sure. We canna fight hundreds; but with yon old de'il's Eye in our possession, we can defy him and his priests too. Bob, you'll be in charge here, and this gentleman--Mr. Beresford, I presume--will likely give you every assistance."

"You may be sure of that," said Beresford.

"Well, that's all. We'll shed our boots. Then, Hamid, lead the way."

Mackenzie took a hoe from a bench; Hamid was armed with a kitchen chopper. They went out, followed by Forrester with his spear. Stealthily crossing the garden, they scaled the wall, dropped lightly on to the grass, and crept across to the door of Hamid's quarters. From this they passed into the kitchen, and thence into the passage.

At the further end was a door on which was a huge lock. But, as Hamid had noticed on his daily visits to the inner apartments, the lock had long since fallen into disrepair, and been replaced by a single latch worked from the inside--eloquent testimony to the fear inspired by the Eye. The point of Forrester's spear, passed through the space between the door and the side-post, sufficed to raise the latch. Mackenzie cautiously pushed the door open, not without a slight creaking, and signed to Hamid to pass through before him.

The cook, nerved by the presence of the sahibs, led them into a corridor dimly lit by small oriental lamps. On bare feet they stole along by the wall, towards the door at the further end. A priest was squatting there, with knees up, and head down bent. Mackenzie drew from his pocket a woollen pad--it had been borrowed from his blanket--and two or three short pieces of cord. These he handed to Forrester with a significant look. Then, stealing forward in advance of Hamid, he crept up to the dozing sentry, and with a sudden swoop clutched him round the throat before he had time to utter a sound. Forrester, just behind, stooped and thrust the gag into his gaping jaws. They turned him face downwards, and a few rapid twists of the cord left him trussed like a fowl at the doorway.

Stepping over him, they pushed the door gently. Mackenzie peeped round its edge. The ante-chamber within was empty. Through this they tiptoed. The door at the further end yielded to their touch, and they passed into a second ante-chamber, lit by more lamps than the first. A slight but prolonged creak as the door opened came near to being their undoing, for thirty feet ahead, at the entrance to the Old Man's apartment, sat a second sentry, whom Mackenzie had not allowed for; and the sound roused him from his slumber. He rose lazily, without any sign of

alarm, expecting vaguely, perhaps, that his colleague without was coming to pass an hour with him. But Mackenzie realised that nothing but extreme quickness could save the situation, and even as he darted forward to tackle the man, the latter let out a loud shout of alarm. It was his first and last cry. Mackenzie drove at him with the full strength of muscles hardened by weeks of spade work, and he fell like a log.

Meanwhile Hamid, with Forrester close at heel, had run on into the inner chamber--the sanctum in which the Old Man of the Mountain slept, ate, and meditated on the Law of the Eye. Like all old men, he was a light sleeper. His functionary's cry had awakened him, and as the two men burst in, they saw his thin, wizened, almost ghoulish frame half risen from his golden couch. The lamplight fell upon his blazing eyes, wide with wonder, resentment and, when he caught sight of Forrester, fury. Hamid shrank before his paralysing glare, retaining enough presence of mind, however, to lift his trembling arm and point to the golden lattice behind which the fantastic head-dress reposed in its recess, illuminated by its own special lamp.

The Old Man observed the movement. His expression changed; it might have been said that terror spoke for the nonce from that cold, mask-like countenance. With agility amazing in so decrepit a figure he leapt from his couch, and darted towards the sacred recess. But Forrester was too quick for him. He sprang to the wall, turned his back so as to cover the lattice completely, and raised his spear to meet the expected attack.

[image]

He sprang to the wall, and raised his spear to meet the expected attack.

For one moment the Old Man glared upon him with eyes that cut like knives. Then, with a sudden swift movement that took Forrester utterly by surprise, he sprang towards a richly gilded hanging that covered the adjacent wall. Forrester wrenched open the lattice, seized the head-dress to make sure of it, and, oblivious for the moment that his incautious handling of it might shiver him to dust, darted after the retreating figure. The hanging swung aside, closing immediately behind the Chinaman. Forrester heard a slight click, and when he drew the curtain aside, was confronted with nothing but a bare wainscoting of panelled wood. The Old

Man was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHT IN THE PAGODA

"Put the thing down! Put it down!" cried Mackenzie, rushing in and seeing the head-dress in Forrester's hands.

"But----"

"Yes, I know; but put it down! Any moment the Eye may open! Be careful, now! Ah!"

He heaved a sigh of relief as Forrester set the head-dress down on the golden table.

"Where is the Old Man?" he continued.

"He went through there," Forrester answered, indicating the spot.

"A secret door! Well, we'll waste no time seeking that. Let him bide. We must discover how he works the Eye."

"What did you do with the priest?"

"Tied him up with his own girdle. I don't think we made noise enough to waken anybody else. Hamid, just run along to the kitchen and block up the door."

"And bring me something to eat, if you can," Forrester added. "I'm famished: have had nothing for more than twenty-four hours: none of us has."

"Och, that's bad. You can't work on an empty stomach. Fetch here all you can, Hamid, and be quick about it.... Now, man, for the Eye! If we can only find out how the thing works, we have the whole caboodle at our mercy."

"Turn it towards the golden lattice; it won't destroy gold, I know that," said Forrester. "And keep behind it, in case of accident."

Standing over the head-dress, they began to examine it, at first with their eyes alone. Then Mackenzie ventured to pass his fingers round its base, feeling gently for the spring or secret button by which he supposed the shutter or eyelid of the Eye was opened. Gradually working upwards, in the course of a few minutes he had left no portion of it untouched except the Eye itself, which he was careful always to avoid.

"How the dickens does the thing work?" he said at length, thrusting his hands into his pockets and contemplating it with a puzzled frown. "We'll not find out without taking it to pieces, to my thinking."

"Does it matter?" asked Forrester. "The main thing is that we've got it, and the Old Man hasn't. Besides, those fellows outside will be getting anxious. Where is Sher Jang, by the bye?"

"In his hut. I wished I could bring him, but he shares the hut with three others, and I didn't dare fetch him out by night in case they smelt a rat and followed him. The fewer the better, to begin with."

"I say, it's nearly morning. Look!"

A faint light was creeping in at the windows high in the wall. Time had passed more quickly than they had been aware. Soon the Old Man's menials would come to extinguish the lamps, and the priests would issue from their dwellings and go about the work of the day.

"What now?" Forrester asked.

"We must get our men inside, fasten the door, and hunt about for the way below. If we once get away with the Eye, we can come back any time and release all the prisoners."

"We can't leave those poor wretches in the cavern to starve. Ah! Listen!"

From somewhere outside came the harsh clangour of a gong.

"The signal to get up!" said Mackenzie. "There's no time to lose. With or without the Eye, we must act. Yon little door leads to the entrance, no doubt. You had better bide here and watch over the head-dress. You might also try to discover how the Old Man gets from here to the judgment seat below. There must be a stairway somewhere. I'll go along to the front, and bring in the others."

"What if the Old Man comes back, or any of his priests?"

"Och, show them the Eye! That'll be enough, I doubt. You've got your spear, too. I'll bring our men here as quickly as possible, and we'll barricade ourselves and get a breathing space to find the way out. Send Hamid after me."

He hurried through the door at the end of the room opposite to that by which he had entered. It opened into a vast central hall. Ranged along the sides were a number of curiously carved chairs, richly ornamented with gold. The walls were decorated--or rather, perhaps, disfigured--with inlaid figures of the Monster. Half-way down the hall, on the left, was an immense golden throne, like that in the underground Temple.

Nobody was in sight. An arch at the further end led to a broad aisle and the great central door. A priest was in the act of throwing the door open. In the half darkness, with his eye fixed on the priest, Mackenzie failed to notice a couple of steps between the central hall and the entrance lobby. He slipped, and though he recovered himself instantly, the noise was sufficient to attract the priest's attention, and he turned round. The sight of a white man rushing towards him hoe in hand from the direction of the inner sanctum seemed to paralyse him for a moment. Then he wheeled about, and fled with flying skirts through the

open door, shouting as he went.

Mackenzie sprinted hard in pursuit, not from any particular wish to catch him, but anxious about the little party waiting in the summer-house. When he issued from the door, he saw the priest running towards a wicket gate in the garden wall. Before he reached it, it was opened from the inner side by a priest of the second order. The running man dashed through, shouting to his colleague as he passed. The latter looked up, saw Mackenzie within a few yards, and turning on his heel, fled away at full speed, leaving the door open and the key in the lock. In a few moments both the priests had rushed across the bridge and disappeared through the open wicket on the further side.

Mackenzie made straight for the summer-house.

"Come!" he cried, seeing Jackson peering round the door. "The whole lot of you! Through yon gate!"

The four dashed out, Jackson leading. Chung Tong moved more slowly than the rest. Mackenzie caught him by the neck, and shoved him along. He paused to shut and lock the gate, then herded the party across the courtyard into the main entrance of the pagoda. When all were inside he flung the door to, locked and barred it, and said:--

"Now, Mr. Beresford, I'll ask you to keep guard here. You're hungry, I know; I'll send you something to eat. The rest of us are just going to find the way to the rift. You don't object?"

"I'm at your orders," answered Beresford. "Forrester is safe?"

"He was three minutes ago. I'm away!"

The thought of Forrester inadvertently opening the Eye urged him through the hall at the speed of a greyhound. Jackson and Wing Wu followed him: Chung Tong dropped heavily into one of the golden seats that lined the entrance lobby, and groaned.

In the Old Man's apartment Forrester was eating a kind of patty which Hamid had just brought on a well-laden tray from the kitchen.

"Take some food to Mr. Beresford at the door--some water too," cried Mackenzie. "All quiet, Dick?"

"Yes. I can't find out how----"

"Dinna fash yersel' with it, man," Mackenzie interposed. At moments of excitement he was apt to relapse into his native idiom. "Bob, and you, mister, take a keek all round for the way below stairs. I'm away to the kitchen. Eat as you go."

He rushed off, anxious to see whether Hamid had secured the back entrance.

"Hech! the fathead!" he exclaimed, when he saw that the cook had merely barred the door; and looked around for material for an effective barricade. In a recess near the stove lay a number of logs of wood. Dragging these out, he jammed them between the door and the opposite wall of the narrow passage.

"That will give them some work," he thought.

Then he rushed back to his friends. Forrester was still feverishly trying to discover how the Eye worked. Jackson was absent. Wing Wu, munching a patty, had just returned from a rapid run through the building.

"Well?" cried Mackenzie.

"Sir, I cannot find either doors or staircases," said the Chinaman.

"Any men?"

"None but the two priests on the floor."

"That's well. Hullo, Bob!"

Jackson was staggering in under a load of arms. The call to action had made a very different man of him.

"By Jinks!" cried Mackenzie. "Where did you find 'em?"

"In a little room beyond. There's a crowd of things of all sorts--pikes, swords, a small armoury."

"A jolly good find!" cried Mackenzie, "But you haven't got our rifles!"

"No; I didn't see them. There's no ammunition for these ancient muskets, but they'll come in useful, perhaps, as clubs."

"No doubt about that," said Forrester, looking up from the head-dress. "It sounds like coming to a fight, Mac."

From without came the dull hubbub of distant voices. It was clear that the whole community was roused. The windows were too high in the wall for any of the party to see what was going on outside, but the increasing noise told that the priests had left their lodgings, and Mackenzie guessed that they were massed in the garden beyond the locked gate. They could know nothing of what had happened within the pagoda. No doubt they were bewildered and alarmed, wondering why the foreigners who had dared to profane the sacred floors of the August and Venerable had not instantly been shattered to dust by the omnipotent Eye.

"Will they scale the wall and attack us?" asked Jackson.

"Maybe, when they discover that we're in possession," said Mackenzie. "But at present you may be sure they're just wandered. They don't know what to do until they get word of the Old Man. What's happened to him?"

At this moment a fierce howl of fury penetrated the walls.

"What's up?" exclaimed Forrester. "Get on my back, Mac, and look out of the window."

Mackenzie mounted. The noise had swelled to a pandemoniac babel.

"The whole gang of them are in the garden yonder," he said. "They're looking up towards the roof, yelling like fiends; I never saw such rage on such ugly faces. I'll run to the door and see what maddens them."

A minute later he emerged quietly into the courtyard, hidden from the priests by the intervening garden wall. Hastening to a spot where the whole upper

portion of the pagoda was in view, he gazed up. The roof was built in three great tiers, one above another. From the second to the third a winding stair led to the summit, upon which there was a small square platform, fenced with a balustrade of ornamental gold work. The bent form of a frail old man was painfully climbing the last few steps. Mackenzie watched him. He gained the top, leant for a moment on the balustrade to rest, then stood with hands uplifted, looking in the distance like a quaint figure carved in ivory. His bald scalp had no protection; his wizened features were twisted in agony and despair. And there the Old Man remained, mute and motionless, gazing down upon the upturned faces of his two hundred priests.

Mackenzie slipped back. As he was relocking the door, Beresford said quietly:--

"I'm not a panic-monger; but do you know that if those yelling shavelings out yonder break through our hole, in a couple of seconds we shall all be blown sky-high?"

"Good heavens above!" ejaculated Mackenzie, aghast. "And we can't prevent 'em!"

"Only by warning them. I speak Chinese: I will go out and tell them."

"You'd never get the chance. They'd tear you limb from limb before you'd got a word out. But I tell you, now. There's a fellow here. Come away!"

He hurried Beresford through the hall and the Old Man's room to the door, outside which the bound priest still lay.

"Tell yon Chinky," he said: "then I'll kick him out."

Beresford very gravely explained to the shuddering Chinaman what the result of an incautious step would be, and advised him to set a guard over the hole. Then the man was bundled out, and the door again made fast.

Mackenzie told what he had seen.

"Was the Old Man urging them to fight?" asked Forrester.

"No; he's done! Not a kick in him, seemingly. Without the Eye he's just a poor wee body. What they'll do I cannot tell; but we'll have another look for the stairway in the meantime."

Leaving Forrester still wrestling with the problem of the Eye, Mackenzie and Jackson ranged through the building from end to end in search of doors in the walls or trapdoors in the floors. After several fruitless minutes they were returning to the sanctum, and suddenly became aware that the noise outside had subsided.

"What's that mean?" cried Jackson.

The words had scarcely left his lips when the great door at the end of the aisle resounded under a loud and violent knocking.

"It means war, I doubt," Mackenzie answered. "Go and join Mr. Beresford,

Bob. I'll bring the others with some of those arms you discovered. We must keep the Chinkies out at all costs."

He raced back to the inner room. Forrester had already left the head-dress, and seized an ancient pike.

"No, no, Dick!" cried Mackenzie. "Stick to your job, man. I'm no good at puzzles myself. We will need that Eye! Hamid, you and your chopper, away to the kitchen door. I doubt they won't come that way because the passage is narrow. If they do, make a bit use o' your chopper, then run and tell me. Awa' wi' ye! You, mister" (addressing Wing Wu), "lift yon musket, or a scimitar, or whatever ye like best, and come. Forget all about the priests and their conjuring tricks; you've got an arm; then fight like the de'il."

While speaking he had clutched an armful of weapons, and led the way back to the great door, with Wing Wu close at heel. Like Jackson, the young Chinaman was a new man now that he was no longer subject to the baneful influence of the priests.

"Here, take your pick," Mackenzie cried on reaching the others, displaying the weapons. "By good luck the door's thick; it will stand a fair amount of battering. Mister, can't you get yon friend of yours to take a hand?"

He pointed to Chung Tong, who had roused himself to work steadily through the eatables brought by Hamid Gul. Wing Wu spoke to him, urging, imploring him to choose his weapon; but he turned a dull eye, and munched on.

"Give me a lift, Mac," said Jackson. "I'll see what they're doing."

On Mackenzie's shoulders he looked through a window.

"The garden is swarming with them," he said. "They're hoisting one another over the wall. They're armed with all sorts of things--picks, rakes, hammers, swords, knives; some seem to have bars of gold! They're all making for the door."

"Are they avoiding our hole?" Beresford asked anxiously.

"Yes; there are two men standing over it, warning off the others as they run by."

"What did you mean about an explosion, sir?" Mackenzie asked of Beresford.

"There's a pit in the cavern. Out of it come rays like those from the Eye. They decompose water: what you sent down nearly made an end of us. A greater quantity would have shivered the whole place to atoms."

Mackenzie drew a long breath.

"They know it, thank goodness!" he said. "Anything new, Bob?"

"No: they're still running this way. There must be some near the door I can't see. They all look as if they're expecting something to happen."

The last words were drowned by an explosion that shook the building.

"Gunpowder! The door!" cried Mackenzie.

Jackson sprang down. They were all far enough from the door to be out of

danger. There were cracks in the timber, but it still held together. A howl of wrath and bafflement rose from hundreds of throats outside.

"They'll try to burst in," said Mackenzie. "I'll take the left: you the centre, Bob: Mr. Beresford the right. Mister Chinaman," he added with a grim smile, "will act as reserve."

They placed themselves, awaiting the assault. Some minutes passed. Outside there was confused and fitful shouting. Then all at once the door creaked under a heavy blow.

"A battering ram!" cried Jackson.

"Ay! Stand clear!"

The blow was repeated again and again. Splinters and slabs of wood fell inward; and at each successive breach a yell of triumph broke from the mob outside. Without firearms the defenders could do nothing to check the destruction. At last the remnants of the door crashed in, and the assailants in a serried mass crowded the entrance.

The full light of morning was behind them: the defenders had some slight advantage in the dimness of the aisle, lit only by a few narrow windows high up in the outer wall. It soon became clear, too, that the priests were not accustomed to the use of weapons. For generations, no doubt, the servants of the Eye had relied on it as their sufficient defence. But they were Chinamen, infuriate, reckless; their ferocity made up their lack of skill, and as they came on with strident yells, wielding whatever weapons they had been able to snatch up, the Englishmen recognised that they had need of all their strength, experience, and resource to stem the human torrent.

Mackenzie had a heavy musket, Jackson an antique sword, Beresford a pike--unfamiliar weapons, all of them. But there was no space for the display of science, even if they had had it. The Chinamen dealt in smashing blows and sweeping cuts. In grim silence the white men parried, thrust, jabbed, smote, to such purpose that in a few minutes a barrier of prone figures was heaped up between them and their howling foes. And all the time, unknown to them, their reserve was strengthened. At the first sight of the invading priests all listlessness fell from Chung Tong. He sprang up, seized a sword, and stood beside his cousin, glaring at his oppressors, and only waiting an opportunity to wreak on them the vengeance long stored in his brooding soul.

For the first few minutes the defenders held their own. There was a slackening in the attack; the bolder spirits in the van had fallen, and barred the way against their comrades behind. But as the ranks thinned slightly, two or three carrying muskets pushed their way from the rear, and thrusting the barrels between the men before them, fired haphazard into the aisle. Mackenzie let out a cry, reeled, and had not recovered himself when one of the priests with a yell of

fiendish joy lunged at him with a pike. In the nick of time Jackson threw himself forward, struck the weapon up with his sword, and gave the Chinaman the point.

Wing Wu seized the chance. He leapt to the spot Jackson had vacated, and brought the butt of his musket down on the skulls of the enemy with a vigour that Mackenzie himself might have envied. Chung Tong could no longer remain idle. Slipping in between his cousin and Beresford he laid about him, with more fury than lustiness. The assailants fell back; the men who had fired withdrew to reload; and the defenders, thankful for a breathing space, tried to gather their flagging energies to meet an assault which they felt would tax them to the uttermost, and in all probability would overwhelm them.

Meanwhile, in the inner sanctum, Forrester had been trying with feverish impatience to discover the secret of the Eye. At the sound of the explosion he could scarcely refrain from rushing to the door; the din and clash of fighting made him tingle; he almost snatched up the weapon nearest to hand and hurried to share the risk and the strife. But he knew how much depended, in the last resort, on the Eye; his sense of discipline was strong; and having tacitly accepted Mackenzie's leadership he checked his impulse and bent all his energies again upon the baffling problem.

When, however, he heard the shots his endurance gave out. Smothering a cry, he placed the head-dress on the table, seized a sword, and was on the point of rushing out towards the scene of action. But in a flash of thought he remembered the Old Man, who might have descended from his perch and be lurking within the panelled wall, ready to spring out and seize his precious instrument. To leave it unguarded would be madness. There was a moment's hesitation; then Forrester lifted the head-dress, rammed it carefully but firmly down upon his head, and thus covered, sped towards the great door sword in hand.

He dashed through the arch into the aisle at the moment when the priests were swarming again to the attack. As he reached the upper step, to encourage his hard-pressed friends he let forth a great shout, that rose shrilly above the cries of the enemy. Placed somewhat higher than they, he was in full view. The leading priests glanced towards him. They recoiled, stared for an instant in silent stupefaction, then with one consent cast down their weapons, and flung themselves prostrate on the floor.

CHAPTER XX

BURSTING THE BONDS

It was Beresford that was quickest to profit by the instinctive act of veneration inspired by the sight of the head-dress which use and superstition had made a symbol of awful authority and power. Stepping forward, he spoke in slow, grave tones over the heads of the grovelling multitude.

"The Law of the Eye must be obeyed," he said in Chinese. "It changes not from age to age. As its minister, I bid you withdraw on your faces from the portal which you have polluted. You shall not stand upon your feet until you reach the wall yonder. Then you shall hear the judgment of the Master of the Eye."

The priests began in silence to crawl back towards the garden wall. Mackenzie and Jackson, after a few moments of breathless suspense, smiled wanly at each other. Forrester, meanwhile, realising with amazement the wonderful effect produced on the crowd by the mere sight of the head-dress, had at once checked his pace, and now moved down the aisle with all the dignity he could muster, and stood motionless in the doorway, in full view of the priests. When they rose to their feet and saw him there, a shiver shot through them.

[image]

Forrester stood in the doorway, in full view of the priests.

"We must carry it through," Beresford murmured hurriedly. "Say two or three words slowly and in a loud tone, and extend your hand towards them. Keep up your dignity as Master of the Eye."

"Arma virumque cano," recited Forrester, reflecting rapidly that while some of the priests might understand English, Latin would probably be unknown to them.

Beresford bowed to the ground. Then lifting himself, he spoke in Chinese.

"Hear the decree of the Master of the Eye. The slaves shall depart from this place, with provisions, arms and gold, sufficient to carry them to their homes. The Master of the Eye, and we his servants, will accompany them. If any man of you molests our party, or seeks to stay our progress, he shall suffer the last punishment."

The priests heard his words in silence. Their eyes were fastened immovably on the august head-dress.

"I must go down to the cavern and bring up the wretches there," said Beresford in a rapid undertone.

"Wait, wait, it's not safe," cried Mackenzie, wincing with the pain in his wounded arm. "Send them all back to their houses first."

"He's right," said Forrester. "Who knows but some of them will go for you

in a frenzy!"

Beresford calmly gave the order; Mackenzie flung to the priests the key of the wicket gate, and they slowly passed through it, crossed the garden and the bridges, and retired into their dwellings on the farther side.

Forrester heaved a great sigh of relief. "The blessed thing won't work," he said. "If they only knew it!"

"They don't! Your appearance was a stroke of genius," said Beresford.

"Not even a lucky fluke!" said Forrester. "I put the thing on to keep it safe. It's plaguey heavy: may I take it off now, d'you think?"

"Surely, for a few minutes at any rate--out of their sight. We must decide rapidly on the next step."

They withdrew a few paces into the aisle, leaving the two Chinamen to keep watch on the priests. Jackson meanwhile did his best to bind up Mackenzie's wounded shoulder. Forrester put the head-dress on the ledge of the golden throne, and linking arms with Beresford, walked slowly towards the doorway.

"Have you found the way down?" asked Beresford.

"No. There's no sign of doorway or staircase, is there, Mac?"

"None whatever."

"Then we must make the priests tell us," Beresford went on. "When I have got the prisoners from below, we must tell the slaves--I fancy by the noise that they are already in a great state of excitement beyond the wall. We'll send them down first into the rift and ourselves bring up the rear. One of the priests will have to guide us, of course."

"And the negritos?"

"They can go too if they choose. But I fancy that as the aboriginal inhabitants of the plateau they won't care to migrate."

"The Old Man?"

"Ah! What shall we do with him? We might fetch him down, I suppose, if we can find his secret door, and take him with us, though I don't know in the least what country would have the right and privilege to punish him as he deserves. On the whole I think we had better let him alone, report the whole matter when we get back, and leave the governments to squabble among themselves about the ownership of this valuable region.... But what on earth's the matter?"

They heard frenzied shouts from the direction of the sanctum. In a few moments Hamid Gul came into view, running like a deer, and screaming "Hai! hai!" at the top of his voice. The Englishmen turned to meet him.

"By Jinks! He's got our rifles!" cried Forrester, in delight.

"But his cries sound more like fright than jubilation," said Beresford, puzzled.

"Well?" Forrester asked, as the Bengali rushed up panting, and thrust a rifle into his hand.

"One-armed bald-head, sahib!" he gasped. "Hai! my lungs and liver! With rifles in arms, lucky find in cupboard, I come through old gentleman's bedroom. Sight I saw knocked me silly, sahib. One-armed josser lost all his hair: bald as basin; went slap bang into wall, sahib."

"Wen Shih?"

"Identical and no mistake, sahib, though hardly knew him without wig. And he had in hands old gentleman's funny old----"

"What!" broke in Forrester with a shout, glancing towards the spot where he had laid the head-dress. It was gone! Behind the throne a panel stood open in the wall.

"He's got it! He's taken it to the Old Man! We're dished!" cried Forrester.

Instinctively he took a few rapid paces towards the sanctum. But he remembered in a flash that he had been unable to find the door in the wall. He started back, in his agitation not knowing for the moment what to do for the best. Then suddenly his eyes fell on the rifle Hamid Gul had thrust into his hands. With a rapid jerk he threw open the chamber. It was full of cartridges, just as when he last had it in the rift.

His friends stared in amazement as he ran to the door, leapt over the fallen priests, and rushed into the courtyard. They followed him to the entrance. He was looking up into the air. On the far side of the enclosure the priests had emerged from their houses, and were standing in silence, gazing intently, eagerly upwards. When Forrester reached the wall he turned about, set the rifle to his shoulder, took steady aim, and fired. A dead silence followed the reverberations of the shot; then a yell of rage burst from the throng of priests, and they came leaping in one tumultuous mob towards the garden. At the same time, far to the left, a dark, bearded figure jumped down from the top of the outer wall, and rushed straight towards Forrester, spade in hand.

Forrester stood for a few seconds steadily gazing up, and the spectators in the portal saw his face pale, and a strange look come into his staring eyes. Then he shivered as though a blast of icy wind had struck upon him, and ran staggeringly back to the doorway. A moment behind him Sher Jang dashed into the pagoda.

"I hit him!" Forrester said under his breath, in the hushed tone of one who has witnessed a tragedy. "He was carrying the head-dress up the stairway to the Old Man. He rolled from roof to roof, and plunged down, down, he and the head-dress, into the rift."

He sank into one of the seats, and stared dully at the floor.

"Quick, you men!" cried Beresford, taking instant grip of the situation. "The rifles! The Chinamen are at us!"

"Have you got our revolvers, Hamid?" asked Mackenzie.

"They are there, sahib. I could not carry----"

"Away with you! Don't stand blethering there! Fetch them, and run like the wind."

The priests were swarming across the garden, jostling one another in the narrow gate, leaping towards the pagoda. Infuriated at the loss of their colleague, just promoted to the higher rank, and at the trick played upon them, they knew that the "foreign devils" no longer had the Eye at their command, and already gloated over their slaughtered bodies. Venting shrill cries of frenzy, they made straight for the entrance, reckless and without order.

But their vision of an orgy of carnage was rudely dispelled. Within the doorway Beresford, Jackson, and Sher Jang stood calmly awaiting them, rifle at shoulder. At twenty paces the rifles flashed; three men fell upon their faces; their comrades reeled back. Another volley crashed into the crowd surging on, and as the survivors staggered, the bark of the revolvers placed by Hamid in the hands of Forrester and Mackenzie mingled with the groans and shrieks of the frantic mob. They turned about, flung away their futile weapons, and fled, a wild rout, through the gate and over the garden towards their dwellings.

"After them!" cried Mackenzie. "No more firing!"

The little garrison stepped out into the open. And there Sher Jang put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast. Instantly the long wall to the left was thick with men, who scrambled over, dropped to the ground, and pursued the panting priests, brandishing the implements of their servitude, and filling the air with fierce triumphant yells. The shikari, at the first sounds of commotion, had collected his fellow slaves and led them to the wall to await his signal.

They swarmed after their oppressors. The passion for freedom throbbed in their veins. The pent-up fury of years of abject captivity burst the fetters that had chained their souls. No hireling valour could withstand them. The priests, their rage become terror, fled like stags before the hounds, across the bridges, through the stream, towards the further gate and their barracks beyond. The huddled mass choked the gate; a few turned at bay; some fell on their knees and prayed for mercy; they had shown no mercy, none they received. The slaves smote and spared not. They forced their way through the gate, hunted the priests to their doors, dashed in after them like terriers into a warren, drove them out at the rear, and chased them pell-mell across the plateau in all directions. And the Old Man still stood like a graven image on his gold-fenced platform aloft.

The white men withdrew into the pagoda. They had neither the power nor maybe the will to interfere between the priests and their late victims.

"We may be thankful we are not all blown up," said Beresford, as they threw themselves wearily upon the golden chairs. "I was in terror lest they should break through into the cavern. One priest put his foot into the hole and fell sprawling over the embankment into the stream. But now our way is clear."

They all turned and looked at the opening in the wall behind the throne.

"Wen Shih has opened the door for us," said Forrester. "He must have come up from below and run off with the head-dress when our backs were turned."

"The irony of Fate!" said Beresford. "Now we will bring up the poor creatures still below, and make preparations to depart."

CHAPTER XXI

DOOM

It was a strange procession that filed some hours later through the rift towards the thundering falls. Sher Jang led the way, rifle on shoulder; the position suited his dignity, and Forrester, in giving it him, had been moved by a desire to separate him as far as possible from Hamid Gul. That worthy had again "sung his own praises quite a lot," and boasted so much of the part he had played in recent events that the shikari found him more offensive than ever.

Behind the leader marched the old zamindar with his daughter, and the whole body of slaves, Chinese, Tibetans, Indians of all castes and none. They were light-hearted, even merry; the reaction from black despair was extreme. Every man bore his load. Many had stinted their supply of food, to cumber themselves the more heavily with gold; for in the final sack of the pagoda they had seized upon every golden article that was portable.

At the rear came the Englishmen with Hamid Gul and Beresford's sturdy little Tibetan, whom they had found in one of the underground cells, despairing about his master, but wholly uncowed by the green eye. The two servants carried their masters' possessions, found in one of the cupboards behind the armoury, among them three articles on which Beresford set much store. One was the tablet that had led him and Redfern to the spot. The second was a roll of parchment giving the Old Man's pedigree; apparently he was the last of a line which had held unbroken sway for many centuries. The third was a similar roll, less ancient, inscribed with the names of the Chinese prisoners who had been employed, during a period of fifty years, in transmuting the lead into gold. At the head of the list was a short statement which Beresford could not fully decipher, but from which he inferred that, fifty years before, a certain mandarin of Yunnan, having scented out a secret in those wilds, had organised an expedition to discover it, and coming into conflict with the father and predecessor of the present owner, had slain him

in fight. The attack had been beaten off, and the Old Man had taken implacable revenge by kidnapping or otherwise impressing young members of every branch of the mandarin's family.

The white men had decided in consultation to take the whole crowd back to Dibrugarh, lay all the facts before the Government, and leave it to determine the future. Hitherto the district had been a No Man's Land; when it became known that it concealed a manufactory of gold, no doubt there would be eager competition for its ownership. The breaking-up of the remnant community of priests was only a question of time.

Towards the close of the day the procession reached the forest village in which Forrester's party had left their carriers. One of the liberated prisoners acting as interpreter, it was learnt that the Nagas, tired of waiting for their employers, and convinced that they had fallen victims to the mysterious Eye, had gone away about a week before.

"I wonder if they ventured into Dibrugarh?" said Forrester.

"It's not likely," Mackenzie answered. "They've no interest in us, and as they've taken our baggage, they'll appropriate that in lieu of pay."

"I hope Redfern recovered," said Jackson.

"I've grave fears about that," said Beresford. "It is more than a month since we parted, and if he were well he would have sent up a relief force long before this. Poor old Runnymede!"

"He didn't know we came, of course," said Mackenzie. "Maybe we were asses not to tell somebody. They all think we are holiday making!"

"By Jinks! I'm ready for a holiday now," cried Jackson.

"A bath and a change of togs would be enough for the moment," said Forrester. "I've never been tempted to compare Dibrugarh to heaven before! We can't leave these people to wander without guidance, or I'd vote for pushing on faster to-morrow. I long to smell soap again."

By dint of hard marching they made more rapid progress next day. In the afternoon, emerging from a tract of forest land, they recognised at some distance the well-remembered contours of the hill which Redfern had named Monkey-face. They had set their course towards its base when a glint of light on the hill-top attracted their attention.

"Nobody heliographing, surely!" exclaimed Forrester.

"There's somebody up there, though," cried Jackson. "Don't you see figures moving?"

They halted, and gazing ahead, made out several small moving objects on the skyline. Every now and then there was a flash, reflected from the rays of the declining sun.

"Would you not say that's a tent?" asked Mackenzie presently, when they

had moved a little nearer. He indicated an object of conical shape on the skyline.

"A tent it is!" answered Forrester. "And by Jinks! they've seen us! They're mounting horses! They're galloping down!"

The distance was still too great for the forms of the riders to be clearly distinguished, and as a measure of precaution the Englishmen called a general halt, and placed themselves, with those of their followers who had firearms, in the van. They watched the horsemen steadily, and in growing excitement. Pith helmets, the khaki dress, the very manner of their riding, bred conviction.

"The Assam Light Horse!" Jackson declared.

He waved his arms and cheered frantically. His companions took up the cry, and a faint response came from the galloping horsemen.

"There's old Jenkins!" cried Forrester presently, recognising a comrade.

"And McIlwaine!" Mackenzie chimed in.

"And Paddy!" from Jackson.

"And, on my life, dear old Runnymede himself!" shouted Beresford. "I knew he wouldn't fail us!"

He started forward impetuously, the others following. The horsemen dashed down, reined up their steeds, and sprang to the ground. There was laughing and hand-shaking, a confused and deafening exchange of welcomes, protests, demands for explanation.

"You old frauds!"

"Dashed unfair!"

"You've had all the fun!"

"Why didn't ye give us all a chance, then?"

"What's kept you, you set of blighters?"

"A pretty set of scarecrows, by Jove!"

Redfern and Beresford clasped hands in silence awhile.

"You're thinner, Harry," said Redfern at length.

"You're not looking very fit yourself," answered Beresford. "Had a shake, old man?"

"Rotten! You're quite sound, eh?"

"Yes, thank God! There's a heap to tell you. What were you doing on the hill?"

"Camping for the night. We've done fifty miles since morning. Were coming on to-morrow. Glad we're too late, old chump!"

Presently, when all had cooled down, they fell to talking practically. It was near sunset, and they decided that Forrester and his party should mount the hill and share the planters' tents for the night, the mingled mass of Orientals camping at the foot.

An hour later, gathered about the camp fire, the band of bronzed and stal-

wart young Englishmen listened raptly to the story told by Beresford. He related all the incidents of the weeks since Redfern was parted from him by the iron shutter. The silence of the audience was broken now and again by ejaculations of horror, rage, sheer amazement. When Beresford had finished, there were cries for Forrester, Mackenzie, Jackson in turn. Each added some detail of his own experience.

"And the villainous Old Man?" cried one.

"We left him standing like an ivory statue on his platform, surveying the wreck of his little empire," said Beresford.

"And the Eye--what became of it?" asked another.

"We don't know," Forrester answered. "None of us had the heart to look for the body of the poor wretch. I suppose the Eye opened; if it did, it is boring a hole somewhere in the rift."

"That one-eyed freak of yours is a trump, Dick," said a third. "We've always wondered why you kept the chap."

"Yes; I shan't forget him. The only grudge I have against Mac is that he didn't tell us in the cavern that Hamid was his postman above."

"Och! I'm not a bletherskite," grunted Mackenzie.

"I vote we go on to-morrow and wipe out the whole rascally crew," cried another.

"And chuck the Old Man into his pit."

"He's too tough and skinny to please the Monster."

"But I say, what about that gold-making concern? Why shouldn't we make ourselves millionaires?"

"I wouldn't go down there again if I came out Rockefeller and Vanderbilt rolled into one," said Forrester emphatically. "Looking back on it, I can't imagine now how I climbed that chimney. When I was near the top, and heard the water gurgling overhead----"

"Well, what of that?"

Before Forrester could reply, the darkening sky was lit up northward by a sudden blaze of light that brought everyone to his feet in consternation. As one of them afterwards remarked, it was like the blinding glare of ten thousand flashlights. It was gone in an instant, and the universe seemed plunged into utter blackness.

The men stood at gaze. Perhaps a minute after the flash, a roar like the gunfire of all the world's fleets rolled and thundered dully about them. The earth trembled beneath their feet. Presently the air became hot, and a shower of fine dust mingled with stones bespattered them.

"A volcano!" cried one.

"No; that is the answer to your question," said Beresford quietly.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"What we feared might happen, has happened. I haven't a doubt of it. Our mining must have weakened the embankment, the stream broke through and plunged into the pit, tons of water were decomposed by the mysterious rays, and the explosion has shattered everything with volcanic force."

"Ay, and there's the end of the Old Man of the Mountain," Mackenzie said gravely.

The workers in the Laibach observatory recorded a seismic disturbance, locating it somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia. No authentic information, accredited by responsible men of science, ever reached them. But in course of time fantastic stories came to this country in private correspondence, and found their way into the newspapers. They were pooh-poohed, laughed at, pronounced incredible. Certain adventurous spirits did indeed slip off with more or less secrecy and hurry by the quickest route to the unknown country watered by the middle Brahmaputra. A company was even formed in London for exploiting gold in that region; but it lived feverishly and died forlorn. Persistent explorers ranged over mile upon mile of desolate country in quest of a gigantic waterfall, a marvellous cañon, and a fertile plateau that was said to be inhabited by an aboriginal race of pigmies. Of the canon they found no trace; only a number of scattered bones, large and small, announced that human beings and strange monsters had once inhabited what was now a rocky waste. A hitherto unknown river was discovered, broken for miles of its course by foaming rapids; but rapids are not waterfalls, as everybody knows.

In his rooms at Cambridge Henry Beresford sometimes shows his visitors a painted tablet from Khotan, and some strangely inscribed rolls of parchment. If pressed, he will tell a singular story, which they listen to politely, and with murmurs of "How very interesting!" totally disbelieve. The fact is that neither he, nor his friend Captain Redfern, nor certain young planters in Assam, care very much to talk about the events of those few weeks when the currents of their lives were mingled, and danger welded them into a comradeship which nothing will sever.

[image]

Tailpiece

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